

Zechariah 8 – Littlebourne 10 November 2024 – PH

8 The word of the Lord Almighty came to me. ² This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.' ³ This is what the Lord says: 'I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.' ⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age.' ⁵ The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.' ⁶ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?' declares the Lord Almighty. ⁷ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west.' ⁸ I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.' ⁹ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Now hear these words, "Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built." This is also what the prophets said who were present when the foundation was laid for the house of the Lord Almighty. ¹⁰ Before that time there were no wages for people or hire for animals. No one could go about their business safely because of their enemies, since I had turned everyone against their neighbour. ¹¹ But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past,' declares the Lord Almighty. ¹² 'The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. ¹³ Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been regarded as a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be regarded as a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.' ¹⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,' says the Lord Almighty. ¹⁵ 'so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. ¹⁶ These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷ do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,' declares the Lord. ¹⁸ The word of the Lord Almighty came to me. ¹⁹ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.' ²⁰ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, ²¹ and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, "Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going." ²² And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him.' ²³ This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"

The word of the Lord Almighty came to me. ² This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.' When God says he is jealous for a place, what does that mean? Does it mean he is very concerned for Zion's welfare? Does it mean he is envious – because can God envy anything? Jealousy today means envy, but also resentment, bitterness, possessiveness, painful longing. In the Bible it means ardour, zeal, intense interest, a desire to deal with unholiness, a desire to put things right whatever the cost. Zion has multiple meanings as well: the city of Jerusalem, the holy place, the place of praise and worship, the place of rescue and deliverance, the mount in Jerusalem. So what is God saying? God has a holy place where he will be with his people whom he loves. God will gather his people there. Zion is precious in God's eyes and remains so today. Mount Moriah is where the temple was, and to the south west is Mount Zion with a monastery of St Saviour and the Room of the Last Supper. In chapter 1 verses 14-17 ¹⁴ Then the angel who was speaking to me said, 'Proclaim this word: this is what the Lord Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, ¹⁵ and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they went too far with the punishment." ¹⁶ 'Therefore this is what the Lord says: "I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over

Jerusalem,” declares the Lord Almighty. ¹⁷ ‘Proclaim further: this is what the Lord Almighty says: “My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem.”’ This leads to what the Lord says in chapter 8 verse 3 ³ *This is what the Lord says: ‘I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.’* Jerusalem will be known again as a city where its people are faithful and honest, and be known as the place where God dwells in his temple. We know that the glory of the Lord filled the temple when it was dedicated by Solomon, and we know when it left after the conquest by the Babylonians in 586 BC (Ezekiel 10). There is no record of the glory returning, nor of the return of the ark of the covenant. So is this passage a prophecy for the future or was it to encourage the returning exiles who were rebuilding the temple? We know that for the next 600 years the Jews lived in Jerusalem, worshipping faithfully, following the law of Moses with its feasts and times of sacrifice, right past the days of Jesus, until the second destruction of the city by the Romans in AD70.

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There are times when prophecies seem to predict doom and gloom – usually for disobedience. But these are encouraging words for the builders of the temple, while reminding them that past bad experiences were behind them. The prophecy foretold that for 500 years, the situation in Israel would be better, even though they waited for a Messiah that they didn’t recognise when he came. The Old Testament ends with a 500 year gap in the history of Israel. The two history books of the Maccabees are in the Apocrypha, which means “hidden away” and are considered not worthy of being included in the Bible... not because the history is doubtful, but because what is attributed to God in them is doubtful. Life went on in Israel for these 500 years with Jews living in much of the land alongside the Samaritans, who were from parts of the Assyrian empire and sent to what is recognised as Samaria because of the resettlement of conquered peoples policy to spread Assyrian rule by mixing up populations so they would lose their old identities and become assimilated into a new Assyrian identity. They brought their language, Aramaic, which became the common tongue in the whole of what is now Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

¹³ Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been regarded as a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be regarded as a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.'

What God says about Israel and Judah is noteworthy: formerly they were regarded as a curse to their surrounding nations because God had abandoned them and sent them scattered all over the middle east. People in the Assyrian and Babylonian empires knew that the Jews – who unlike other peoples still kept their identity – were being punished because the God they continued to worship had abandoned them and allowed them to be conquered. Now things would change because they were back in the promised land, and would become prosperous again, and their enemies could not conquer them. For 250 years they would be regarded as a blessing because they were peaceful and didn't cause much trouble... until the Greek rulers sought to desecrate the temple which resulted in the Maccabean revolt, which lasted for 30 years (167 – 134BC). Then there was a 100 years of independence. The Romans occupied Israel in 63BC, without much trouble, leaving the existing Herodian dynasty in power acting to keep order for the Romans. The British did the same in India with half the country left in the hands of local kings or rajahs and the other half under direct rule.

Zechariah's word from God was to encourage the builders of the temple to carry on with the work, because God was with them. They need not fear that their enemies would attack them... they would be safe with God on their side.

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God reminds the people that the exile was their own fault and had angered God, so their return pleased God and he would do good to them, again with the proviso that they obey his commands and behave well towards each other. Loving your neighbour as yourself would get God's approval. God is encouraging his people and promising that he is going to bless them, but as always this is not unconditional. The people need to keep their part of the covenant as God keeps his.

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This last prophecy has two promises: the periods of fasting should be joyful festivals for Judah and the peoples from all over the world will come to seek to Lord Almighty.

In chapter 7 God said he wasn't impressed with fasting. Fasting to remember what happened is not what God wants, he wants fasting to remember why things happened. The cause of the fall of Jerusalem was that the people had turned away from God and no longer put their trust in him.

Jews still remember the dates when bad things happened resulting in their exile. The fast of the fourth month - 17th Tamuz was the date the walls of Jerusalem were breached in 586BC – and coincidentally that same date the Romans breached the walls in AD70. The fast of the fifth month - Tisha B'av, was three weeks later when the temple was destroyed. The fast of the seventh month - Tzom Gedalya, was the date Gedalia the governor appointed by Nebuchadnezzar was assassinated ending the Judean kingdom. The fast of the

tenth month - 10th of Tevet, was the date the siege of Jerusalem began in 588BC. So for 70 years in exile, the Jews fasted on these dates to remember what happened in Jerusalem, and God says that looking forward these days should be times of gladness that his people have turned towards God again, instead of mourning that God allowed them to be abandoned and conquered.

The second promise links in with the blessing given to Abraham (Genesis 12:3 – *“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* Genesis 18:18 – *“Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.”*) that all will at some point come to acknowledge that the Lord God of Israel is the true God, and that his people have been a blessing to the world. The Jews of all peoples have remained a nation for 4,000 years. No other nation on earth has this long a history of itself and has kept its identity intact, despite having no homeland for much of that time. God sent the Jews a Messiah but many rejected him.

Some will interpret verse 23 as meaning Jesus is the one Jew but that is probably wishful thinking. *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”*

The Romans found the Jews unique in their worship of one God, when the whole world worshipped multiple gods, and their willingness to die for their one God rather than disobey any of his commands was also pretty unique. This willingness to die rather than accept any other god carried on with Christians who were martyred for refusing to bow to a divine Caesar.

So what can we make of this chapter? God looks after his own. Despite many setbacks, many disasters, many lives lost, Israel remains the apple of God’s eye, and will always be a witness to his faithfulness. The holocaust was bad – 6 million, the Spanish inquisition was bad 300,000, the Ukraine pogroms in 1919 - 100,000, and many more instances of Jews being killed simply for being Jewish. Millions have been displaced from the Muslim world since 1948, some to Israel and others to America and Europe. The eastern European (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Baltic States, Ukraine and Russia) Jews who spoke Yiddish originally were expelled from Germany in the middle ages in their tens of thousands. Yet as God says here, he will save his people. Today the Jews remain persecuted simply for being Jewish. The real reason is that the world hates Jews because they are different and because they refuse to reject God. The reason Christians are increasingly being hated is for the same reason. We too are under a blessing from God, and can put our trust in him. So long as we too *“Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷ do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely.”* In addition that we *“love truth and peace.”* Truth is in short supply these days as people do not want to hear the truth, and when they are confronted with truth, will seek to hide from it or deflect attention away from it. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life... no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. The truth is uncompromising, and the claim of Christianity is that you have to accept Jesus as Lord to go heaven. Much is said about those who never hear the truth and where they go when they die, and we are still at a place in time when the Word of God has not penetrated the entire world, so that it can be said that none have any excuse for not knowing the choice to be made by every human being. But in the western world, no one has any excuse for never having heard the Gospel, and no one can say they never heard of Jesus or God. Yet the Gospel hasn’t penetrated the minds of most people as something of the greatest importance in life, more important than anything else the world has to offer. It is up to all believers to use the opportunities available to share the Gospel and the love of God whether in words or deeds. The Great commission is to *“go out, discipling all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Remember always that our role is to make Jesus known, and the Holy Spirit’s role is to convict people of their sinfulness and to reveal the reality of the forgiveness and love of God. Let’s pray.