

George Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH

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1:1-2

We see at once that we are dealing with history. The situation the prophet is addressing in the name of the Lord is linked to and in measure explained by the past. This is important because we all have a tendency to interpret our circumstances in terms of recent and immediate happenings. But it is the past actions and attitudes of individuals, churches and nations that have led to the present situation. It is important therefore to have a broader and more long-term view of things and to have some sense of history which can teach us many things. One thing is clear: God raises up His prophets to speak in every generation and He does not leave Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). The last twelve books of the Old Testament from Hosea to Malachi are called the Minor Prophets, not because they were of less importance than the Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel) but simply because these books are smaller in size. Nine of the Minor Prophets ministered before the Jewish nation collapsed and the people were carried away captive to Babylon. The remaining three, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, spoke their messages after the Jews had returned to their own land and were engaged in rebuilding both the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of that return and rebuilding. The book of Esther tells the story of events in Persia, and a threatened extermination of the Jews there while the new work was going on in Jerusalem. What we are dealing with is the story of God at work in the world and God speaking to His people in respect of *His* work and *His* Kingdom.

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1:1-2

If we look back to Haggai 1:1; 2:1; 2:10 and 2:20 we are given the dates in the reign of Darius of Persia when Haggai delivered his four main "sermons". It seems that Zechariah began his preaching half-way through the ministry of the older prophet, and the "word of the Lord" through Zechariah (covering chapter 1:1 to 8:23) was spoken in a spell of some two years (cf. 1:1 and 7:1). We are told that the name Zechariah means "God remembers" and that thought should mean a lot to us as it did to the Jews down the ages of their history. God does not forget His people or His work (Isa. 49:15; Ps. 40:17). Zechariah was a fairly young man when his ministry began. He was born in the latter years of the captivity in Babylon and came with his family back to Jerusalem. If his family returned with the first wave of exiles then they were the "keen" ones, eager to be part of the new thing that God was doing. The boy Zechariah would have grown to manhood during the spell when the work of God was developing because the people were eager, and then he would have been aware of the work slowing down, not only because of the pressures of the enemy (Ezra 4:1-6,16-24) but because a spirit of carelessness and complacency had dulled the minds and hearts of God's own people. This is always a danger after the first eager and costly stage of any work of God. Sometimes people get disheartened because there is little to show for all the effort, and when hard slogging work has taken the place of initial excitement. That is when we all need to be challenged about our priorities and have our excuses swept away. This was Haggai's first sermon (Hag. 1:2-4). It would not have been popular, but it shook the people awake and they were ready then for Zechariah's ministry.

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1:1-2

Challenging ministry must be allied to encouraging ministry. Haggai had not fallen short in this because he spoke of a future work of God that would be more glorious than the past (Hag. 2:1-9). Zechariah, along with Haggai, preached in a way that stirred the people to a new dedication and the work began again, as Ezra 5:1-5; 6:14 records. When Haggai spoke of a glorious future development of the work of God the people may well have asked how this would come about since there were so many obstacles and hindrances. They were fully aware that whenever a work of God begins to go forward there will be a work of Satan opposing it. Zechariah answered their question, their doubts and their fears, by focusing their attention on God rather than on their circumstances and difficulties. It is important what we look at. The great missionary apostle Paul coped with the costly demands and bitter persecutions of his ministry by looking deliberately at the things which are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). Of course that calls for faith. It means we must know God and learn what He is like,

and that is exactly how Zechariah began. He pointed the people to the lessons of the past generation and said quite plainly that their lives and work collapsed because God was angry with their fathers because of their unfaithfulness. The message was plain and still applies now. If this generation does not learn to do right by God then they too will degenerate and their work will come to nothing. The Word of the Lord came to Zechariah and he had to speak it. And when God speaks we should listen.

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1:1-6

The prophet's first sermon is a lesson from history and a call to come back to God. The people are reminded that it was the faithful, covenant-keeping God who had been very angry with His own people. And it was anger after long patience and pleading, as Jeremiah 25:3-11 makes plain. Always God's call had been for His people to come back to Him, as Malachi 3:6-12 affirmed, and with the call there was the promise of wonderful forgiveness (Micah 7:18-20). God is still like that. His promises still stand and open up all manner of possibilities for the future. But promise can be forfeited through unbelief, and opportunity can be lost through disobedience. The prophet appealed to his generation to remember how their fathers failed because they refused to listen. All God said would happen did happen and when that generation ended up in the shame and loss of captivity in Babylon they could no longer hide the fact that they were spiritual failures. It is difficult to tell in the second half of verse 5 whether the words refer to the past generation or to the attitude of those to whom Zechariah spoke. Either way the message is clear and plain. God deals with His people. He is to be taken seriously. He has plans and purposes for us. However we may have strayed, rebelled or lost heart, God is still saying, "Return to Me, and I will return to you." He wants us, is eager to bless us, and our place in His plans for the future is ours if we come to Him in repentance and faith. What a God to serve! Why should we ever want to go our own way?

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1:7-11

Zechariah's second message to the people came three months after his first one (cf. v.1,7). The people had been left to ponder the solemn truth regarding God's dealing with His own people, and it takes time for that kind of sermon to sink in. But before Zechariah delivered his second message Haggai had spoken with equal solemnity (Hag. 2:10,20-23), and no doubt the people would be wondering just what it meant that God was going to shake the heavens and earth and overthrow kingdoms. Again it takes time for such truths to sink in, for even God's own people at times forget that God is someone with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). God is always pointing to and moving His work forward into the future but He does not leave His people with only messages of solemn warning. He is a God of great encouragement and reassurance and this is the emphasis of the "word of the Lord" that came to the prophet in a night-time vision. We must not think he was dreaming because that would introduce an element of unreality. It seems that the prophet had spent at least part of the night among the myrtle trees in the glen or hollow (not as deep as a ravine) in the Kidron valley outside the city of Jerusalem. There may well have been a garden there, perhaps similar to the Garden of Gethsemane and, although we are not told specifically, Zechariah may have used that quiet place frequently as a place of prayer. A true prophet who speaks the word of the Lord will always be a man of prayer. And, since Zechariah was burdened about God's work and what seemed to be a costly but significant development of it, it was in something of a "Gethsemane" of prayer that he received this vision of assurance. After all, there is nothing like prayer to enable us to see clearly the spiritual truths that undergird our lives and service.

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1:7-11

As Zechariah waited on God and interceded for His people, God gave him clear sight and his eyes were opened (2 Kings 6:15-17). He was given to see things that are normally unseen, things that are always there and must be grasped by faith. This is how we endure and go on in faithfulness (Heb. 11:27). Zechariah saw a man, and the sight did not alarm him even though later it is made plain that this was the Angel of the Lord. There seems also

to have been an interpreting angel who talked with the prophet and, although Zechariah was somewhat mystified as to the meaning of it all, he does not seem to have been surprised or alarmed by the fact that he was in the company of angels. Why should he be? Why should we be sceptical about angels, and guardian angels? In Hebrews 1:14 we are told about ministering spirits sent from the presence of God to serve and to guard those who stand in the salvation that is in Christ. Do we not love to sing that "the angel of the Lord encamps around the dwellings of the just" (Ps. 34:4-8)? Remember, of course, that Zechariah, being a devout Jew, would be well versed in the scriptures of the Old Testament and would thereby have the basis for understanding and to receive instruction from God. Nowadays the problem is that even Christians do not know their Bibles as they should and consequently do not know God as they should. The prophet's encounter with angels may well have reminded him of such verses as Gen. 22:11; Exod. 14:19; Num. 22:21 ff; Isa. 63:9. God's guardian care is a reality, even though His ways are sometimes perplexing. What Zechariah was learning was that in respect of both the present and the future he was not alone. God was with him. What that meant we shall see in tomorrow's study.

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1:7-11

When we speak of God's providence we tend to be rather unclear as to what we really mean. Zechariah was taught the truth in this vision of the horsemen. He was shown God's patrols which supervise the whole earth. Behind the significant horsemen there were others and they brought their report to the Angel of the Lord. The picture is one of a variety of agencies under supervision and leadership carrying out an unending watchful guard over the whole earth. This was not something new. They had always been there, always active, but Zechariah had never seen them or been aware of them. But now, by way of encouragement for his ministry and for the people he ministered to, his eyes were opened. The vision taught him about the providence of God in terms of perfect knowledge, supervision, direction and execution. This should be immense comfort to all of us. It reminds us of the often forgotten reading at Christmas time which affirms that the government is on His shoulder and that the zeal of the Lord carries forward to perfection the Lord's work (Isa. 9:6,7). Contrast God's patrols in their peace-keeping activity with that of Satan who also goes to and fro on the face of the earth (Job 1:7; 2:2). Remember that even Satan and all his activities are under the providential restriction of God. Satan is not a free agent. At this stage it is not clear exactly why the report was that all was at rest or peace, but the prophet's first reaction must have been one of reassurance, recognising that no matter how turbulent the international situation seemed to him, everything was in fact under control. The strong, sure providence of God is a wonderful comfort, not least on the personal level. Read for example, Psalm 139:1-18 and remember that the right hand of God that holds us is the powerful hand of salvation.

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1:12-17

The vision continued to develop and Zechariah heard the Angel of the Lord speaking, not to him, but to the Lord of Hosts. Remember that the Angel was spoken of as a man (8) and we must see here some indication of the great and true man, even Jesus Christ, who is the glorious executor of all God's perfect purposes as the vision in Revelation 5:1-5ff makes plain. It must have thrilled the prophet to realise that this great defender of Jerusalem, its people and its work, was also the great intercessor. We must see our glorious Saviour in all of this because our hope and confidence are in One far greater than even the greatest of angels. The New Testament teaches us that we have one who takes our side and who understands all our humanity and frailty (Heb. 4:14-16). He is our great Advocate with the Father, speaking always on our behalf (1 John 2:1). And He ever lives to make intercession for us, pleading our cause at God's right hand, omnipotent to save (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34). The petition in v.12 indicated that the mere physical return of the Jews to their homeland was not the end or fulfilment of God's plans for them. There was still much to be done before it was evident that God's blessing once again rested on His people. We are told that God's answer was "gracious (kind) and comforting words" and on the basis of these words Zechariah was told to address the people who, as we have seen, were greatly in need of awakening and encouragement. They needed to be told of God's very jealous love for His people, a

passionate love that had never changed nor ever would change even when His people failed and were unfaithful. It is as if God is saying, "You are mine, and I want you for myself, and I will not give you up to others." (Isa. 43:1; Hosea 11:8; 2 Tim. 2:13). We cannot ever deserve that love. We may often grieve God's love. But His love will not change, and He will hurt us rather than let us go away. That is love to trust and to rest in.

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1:12-17

There is a link from v.15 back to v. 11. It seems that the dominant world power of Persia had subdued all its enemies and there was international peace. But God was mindful of the fact that while He had, in His providence, used the evil nations to discipline His people, they had in fact overstepped the mark, and had shown a ruthlessness and an arrogance in their own power. Such had been their ferocity that the Jews had thought their God had finally abandoned them. That had never been the intention, as Isa. 54:7-8 makes plain. These evil nations were now to pay the price because God was angry with them. But it seems as if God was saying to Zechariah, "Leave that side of things to Me. You go and tell My people the plans of blessing I have for them." What a message it is to a demoralised people to be told that their God is back with them, that His purposes are clear and already operative, and that the blessing that is to be theirs is far greater than anything they have yet imagined. It is to be overflowing blessing. This was indeed the message the people needed to awaken them out of their lethargy and to get them renewed in their task of rebuilding the work of their God. No one can keep going creatively if they feel their labour is in vain and all for nothing. That is why we have words of assurance such as 1 Cor. 15:58. But we are also told in Eph. 3:20 that God is able to do far more than we ever aspire to, even in our prayers. We begin to see why Zechariah is called the prophet of hope. He cried aloud (17) about God's purposed blessing to His people who had been so wonderfully restored and given a future of great possibility. Read Hosea 14:4-7 and Jer. 29:11.

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1:18-21

Zechariah's visions are vivid. He was shown four horns, and horns, whether on the animals or used as decorations on helmets or thrones, are symbols of power. The prophet asked for enlightenment, and it is always a good sign when people, especially God's servants, ask for understanding rather than jump to conclusions or simply ignore things. The horns represent the powerful nations, North, South, East and West, that had overthrown Israel and Judah, and had been instrumental in their captivity. No doubt Zechariah would have identified these nations by name but we are not told these names and we need not speculate. The horns seem to have been seen on living animals (this is assumed rather than stated) and the whole of this passage has a feeling of activity about it. Neither the prophet nor the people were to assume that these "powers of the world" were finally subdued. That has still to come at the end of the age and all who are involved in the work of God and of the Gospel must recognise that the whole world order, in its atmosphere, intention and activity, is set against Christ. We read of this in the New Testament in 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19. Jesus Himself said that His servants would have struggle and tribulation in the world, but affirmed that He had overcome the world (John 16:33). Peter, in his epistle, encouraged believers not to be *surprised* by fiery attacks and fierce battles but to recognise that this was in fact part of the inevitable battle that led to victory (1 Pet. 4:12-14). In Psalm 2 we read of kings and nations coming together to fight against God and his people but we are told they would be dealt with almost without effort. In Revelation 17:15-17 we read of the great powers of the world yielding their authority and collaborating with the Evil One but being compelled by God's sovereign power to do His will. These are the lessons Zechariah was learning in this vision.

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1:18-21

We concentrated yesterday on the nations symbolised by the horns but Zechariah was shown also four workmen or craftsmen or smiths (RSV). These "blacksmiths" (think of heavy hammers smiting on anvils) were God's instruments to terrify and to cast down the powerful nations of "anti-christ". Note the word "terrify" and set it

over against the arrogance of unbelief and evil. The time comes in the providence of God that evil men and powers are given the shock of their lives, being made to realise that their every thought, word and action has been under the scrutiny of God all along, and that the time of their judgment has come. This is something we need to remember when faced with the frightening turmoil of the international situation. It is God alone who rules in the kingdoms of men, raising up and casting down, and giving power to whoever He chooses (Dan. 4:17, 32, 34-35). Power belongs to God, and to God alone (Ps. 62:11 AV). Of course, it takes faith to believe this, to rest in it, and to wait for the outworking of God's purposes to become evident. His ways are always higher, better and surer than ours (Isa. 55:8,9). At times we are able to see the hand of God on situations but at other times we have to trust in the dark. Even when we see evidences of God's working and His power we must remember that what we see is only the "outer fringe of his works

" (Job 26:8-14). We need to be reminded that God is everywhere present and is always active. He alone opens doors and shuts them (Rev. 3:7). Remember this when next we sing the metrical versions of Psalms 96 and 98. The Lord reigns. He is the one whose mighty "blacksmiths" will deal with men and nations of evil. This is our security, and Zechariah was shown this in his next vision.

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2:1-5

The prophet was shown that God Himself is the wall of protecting fire around His work and people (Jerusalem), and is also the glory, that is the presence and the blessing, in the midst. Always remember that the prophets spoke to a people who were well taught in the Old Testament scriptures and they knew of God's past dealings with them. They knew of the pillar of cloud and fire, symbolising the presence of their God, leading them in their journeys (Num. 9:15-18ff). They knew of the glory of God that came down on Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 7:1-3). They knew of times in their past history when the glory of God departed from their life and work as the people of God (1 Sam. 4:21). The people to whom Zechariah ministered would have known from the teaching of Ezekiel about the glory of God departing from the Temple (Ezek. 10:18,19). We can understand this best if we think of it happening to our own church. What if the time came when in all our services there was no sense at all of the presence of God, no throb of life in the singing of praise, no spiritual food in the preaching, and nothing at all to encourage or help our needy hearts. All these things the Jews had forfeited for a long time because of their sins and disobedience. But now their God was back amongst them. Think of how much is missing from a home when a loved parent or child has gone away, and what joy and expectation there is when the missing one returns to stay. Now we know what this vision, this "word of God", meant to Zechariah. What a thrill he would have in preaching this truth to his people. Knowing that God is with us, and that we walk in fellowship with Him, is life indeed (1 John 1:5-7). This is what we lose when we sin and stray. But the Lord wants us back. The Prodigal discovered this (Luke 15:20).

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2:1-5

Note carefully that this vision begins with a man so preoccupied with measurements and statistics that he was failing to see and to participate in the glory of what God was doing and was going to do. It seems that the man was giving a lot of time trying to compare the Jerusalem of the present and the future with that of the past, forgetting that God is always doing something new (not novel) so that the future is always greater than the past. This is how we must think of the work of the Gospel and of Christ's kingdom. "Wider still and wider, shall thy bounds be set" because the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev. 11:15). The prophets declared that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14). Zechariah's generation had already been told that the glory of the Temple (and its work) now being built would be greater than that of the past (Hag. 2:9). But in practice we need to reconcile in our thinking (not in statistics) the power, purpose and promise of God with the present situation we find ourselves in. The danger is that in being too busy measuring and calculating we end up fashioning God's work according to our own ideas and pattern and thereby we narrow it down. The young man in the vision had to be told to stop his measuring because "Jerusalem" was going to be like a vast number of villages,

no longer restricted and confined by walls. Of course, the wall of a city was deemed vital for its protection and the young man may have protested that what he was doing was out of necessary concern for the good of God's work and people. He needed to be told that God Himself is the protecting wall of fire. It is God who is our refuge. It is God who guards His own work. That is safety indeed, cf. Col. 3:3.

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2:6-9

The exhortation "Ho! Ho!" (AV, RSV) is similar to Isa. 55:1 and is rightly translated "Come! Come!" in NIV. It introduced a warm, sympathetic call from God to the Jews remaining in exile to clear out of the land of the north and from Babylon and to come from the four winds to Zion. There seem to have been two reasons for this urgent call, a call to haste just as at the time of the Exodus when Israel escaped from Egypt's power (Ex. 12:11; Deut. 16:3). The first danger was that the exiles might find themselves settling in too comfortably to the worldly life of pagan nations and thus they would lose all desire to face the cost of identifying once again with their own people. This is always the danger of backsliding and being adrift from God. The longer it goes on the harder it is to come back to God. The other reason for urgency is that these nations were drawing near the time when they would be judged by God for their wickedness and, if the exiles were still there, then they would be caught up in the judgment. Think of the urgency of the messengers of God and the strenuous efforts they had to make before Lot and his family were rescued from Sodom and its judgment (Gen. 19:15-26). Remember also the warning of Jesus regarding Lot's wife whose affections were so entangled with the life of the evil worldly city that she came to a sad end (Lk. 17:32). In many ways we do not nowadays seem to have this kind of urgency and earnestness in our dealing with the things of God. In a generation when so many of us seem to be comfortably off, compared to so many in the world, it seems that "worldliness" is one of our great dangers and we do well to heed Romans 12:1-2. An old evangelical hymn (seldom sung now) asks the question, "Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?" Another hymn speaks the same message when it says,

"Tell me the same old story
When you have cause to fear
That this world's empty glory
Is costing me too dear." (Hankey)

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2:6-9

Verses 8 and 9 are very difficult to understand in some translations except in one statement, which is what we concentrate on. For the rest, read the translations in both NIV and NEB. There seems to be a connection made between the glory of God, the sending of the prophet, and the vindication of his message and work. There is an indication also that the prophet sees himself sent to the *nations* as well as to Israel, seemingly at first with a message of judgment, but later with a message of hope and salvation (cf. v.11). But at the heart of these difficult verses there is the amazing statement regarding the value God sets on His people, the immense tenderness with which He regards them, and the inevitable reaction against those who harm them. Why God should regard them or us as the apple of His eye is beyond understanding but it is true. Time and again God would express His tender love for His people in words such as Isa. 43:1-4. In Hosea 11:8 God faces the fact that His people were determined to backslide and yet He could not find it in His heart to give them up. In the New Testament believers are described as a people for God's personal possession and are urged to cast their cares on the God who cares for them (1 Pet. 5:7). It is little wonder that Scripture says, "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us" (1 John 3:1). God is great, glorious, powerful and mighty to save, but we must never forget His exquisite tenderness of love for those who are the apple of His eye. In all our affliction He is afflicted, and no-one could care for and carry His people more tenderly than He (Isa. 43:1; 40:10-11).

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2:10-13

When the people of God begin to rejoice in their God because they have come back to Him, and when they become aware of the gracious power of God that protects them, the wonderful love God has for them and the glorious (but unseen) presence of their God in the midst of them, then they begin to be God's instruments of evangelism. We are told here that many nations will be drawn to God, and the same glorious emphasis is repeated in 8:20-23. This is evangelism by magnetic attraction on a spiritual level. It is expressed in different terms in John 12:32. No one will ever be attracted to a dull, lifeless church, nor to Christians whose spirituality is formal, a thing of duty rather than pleasure. But when believers love the Lord with all their heart and soul and strength, there will be a natural buoyancy about their lives, and it will be unselfconscious. It is something that will be noticed even when people do not really know what the difference is. But people will say, as they said of the early apostles, that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). There is a marvellous statement or promise in Ezek. 36:23 where God declares that He will yet use His people to glorify and honour His name. The AV translates the latter part of that verse, ".... the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes." That means that the essence of true evangelism is holy and dedicated living on the part of Christians. This directs us back to v.6-7 where God is urging His people to make sure they do not lose out in the thrill of what God is about to do. It is really a call that we should be a willing people in the day of God's power (Ps. 110:3 AV). "Come, let us to the Lord our God, with contrite hearts return" (Scottish Paraphrases). Why should we hesitate?

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2:10-13

Few of us in our lifetime have seen any great outpouring of God's saving power, whether we call it awakening or revival. But what we read in church history of great days of God's power tells us of how a sense of awe can fall on the community as well as on the church, as people become aware of God drawing near to speak, to convict of sin, and to save. The prophet seems to be aware here (13) of God stirring Himself for action. Read Psalm 44:23-26 and Isaiah 51:9-11. When God hears and answers prayers like these, the reaction of His people is expressed in the words of Isa. 25:9. But are we willing to pray this kind of prayer and to pay the price of sharing in the answer, because as we shall see tomorrow there is reaction? What are our thoughts when we sing, as we have done recently, the hymn:

"Arm of the Lord, awake, awake!
Put on Thy strength, the nations shake,
And let the world, adoring, see
Triumphs of mercy wrought by Thee.

"Say to the heathen from Thy throne,
'I am Jehovah, God alone';
Thy voice their idols shall confound,
And cast their altars to the ground.

"Let Zion's time of favour come;
O bring the tribes of Israel home;
And let our wondering eyes behold
Gentiles and Jews in Jesus' fold.

"Almighty God, Thy grace proclaim
In every clime of every name;
Let adverse powers before Thee fall,
And crown the Saviour Lord of all." (Shrubsole)

But He has to be crowned in our lives first of all. When we pray for revival we must remember it is first of all the reviving of the church, *then* the outsiders are gathered in.

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3:1-5

The hymn quoted yesterday referred to adverse powers and we must recognise that wherever there is a true work of God there will be a work of Satan to confuse, oppose and to distract. The picture is of Joshua, the High Priest, the representative of all the people, standing before God. Satan is there as the accuser, drawing attention to the sin, failure and soiled nature of Joshua and the people. Then God speaks in terms of silencing Satan. No doubt there is also included in the reference to Joshua's dirty garments the sense of unworthiness that the people must have felt. When God comes to us after our failure and backsliding, declares afresh His love, and speaks of restoration and future service, there is inevitably the feeling, "How could God use someone like me?" But preoccupation with sin and failure when we are faced with God's glorious forgiveness is not a spiritual attitude and it is certainly not helpful or productive. In a very real sense it is true to say that the more we go on with God the more we will be aware of unworthiness and the more we will marvel at God's grace. There is a hymn that says, and says rightly, "They who fain would serve Thee best, are conscious most of wrong within." It cannot be otherwise because God is light (1John 1:5) and the more we are in the light the clearer our sin and unworthiness are seen. Now the only answer to Satan's accusations is Scripture. And the glorious affirmation of the Gospel to every believer is that there is *now* no condemnation, and a challenge is given: who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect (chosen ones)? It is God who justifies and declares them justified and accepted (Rom. 8:1,33). Note that there is no denying of Joshua's uncleanness. If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8). The message is that God deals with sin and, of course, He did it through the Saviour who put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself (Heb. 9:26).

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3:1-5

These verses are so wonderfully reassuring that we linger with them, aware of how this picture of forgiveness, cleansing, restoration and re-commissioning to service is repeated in the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:17-24. Take note of what we have been shown thus far in the first two chapters. First, it was God's Patrols, supervising the on-going work (1:1-17). Then God's Blacksmiths, His craftsmen, emphasising that power belongs to God alone. Then in 2:1-5 we have God's Intentions, the vast and glorious purposes of His will, guarded by His power (wall of fire) and His love (apple of the eye). God is then shown as the glory in the midst of His people (2:5). Now in today's verses we see God as the Righteousness of His people. Joshua, representative of the people, is "clothed in righteousness divine" to use Wesley's marvellous phrase. There is no suggestion that God closed His eyes to the sinful state of His people, nor did He in any way excuse it. When Satan accused, God silenced him by dealing instantly and comprehensively with the problem. Both Joshua and the people of Jerusalem were declared to be chosen by God, plucked by God from the dangerous fire of their own transgression. That being so, at God's command, it is made plain that this people are forgiven. Their iniquity is not to be discussed any more because it is put away (Isa. 43:24; Jer. 31:34). Their service and their fellowship and standing with their God have been fully restored. Now, when God says this kind of thing, the Devil is silenced. He has no grounds on which to accuse and torment. Because this is so, we must learn to resist the Devil and refuse to let him steal our peace and joy.

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3:6-10

The angel of the Lord speaks to all the people through their representative, Joshua. The right of free access into the holy presence of God is something now given to every believer, as the New Testament makes plain (Heb. 4:16). At the same time we must see in these verses the recommissioning of Joshua as the man trusted by God for holy service. But there is responsibility and moral and spiritual challenge involved. Joshua was called to walk in God's ways in commitment to Him, and that means a turning away from sin. It calls on God's servant to

walk in the light (1 John 1:5-7) with open face and with nothing to hide (2 Cor. 3:18). That is the only way to be useful in God's service. Joshua was also called to keep God's charge in terms of faithful ministry and intercession. In our denomination we speak of a congregation as a minister's "charge" and while that indicates privilege, in caring for what rightly belongs to God, it also brings great responsibility. Think of Paul's charge to the elders in Ephesus in terms of guarding and shepherding what belonged to God, what he had redeemed at such great cost (Acts 20:28). If Joshua fulfilled God's call he would be given God's authority in his work and, when it is manifest that the hand of God is on a spiritual leader, then it is safe to trust and be guided by such a man. But such a man will never think in a proud way of his place or his authority. Joshua was also to have the right of access among those who stand before God. This seems to suggest a sharing in the secret counsels of God and knowing His will. Read a passage such as Ephesians 1:3-10 and see how our passage in Zechariah points forward in a glorious way to the spiritual truths of the New Testament. In many ways we have scarcely begun to realise the sheer dimension of God's intentions for us.

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3:6-10

Joshua is spoken of as having friends, colleagues in spiritual service, sitting before him and, in view of the spiritual work committed to him, such fellowship of like-minded people must have been a great support and encouragement. But beginning in v.8 God, through the prophet, is speaking to this group of men who were being made aware not only of the spiritual service awaiting them, but also of God's assessment of them. This group of "servants" of the Lord were a good omen, a hopeful sign for the future, and an indication that God was stirring Himself to carry the work forward. This group of forgiven dedicated men was in fact a sign of the Servant who was to come in the future. That coming one is called the Branch and is then referred to as the Stone. Without doubt such names would awaken echoes in the minds and hearts of a people nurtured in God's Word. Isaiah spoke of the Servant of the Lord and passages such as Isa. 42:1-4 and 52:13-53:12 point us resolutely forward to Christ. Acts 8:26-35 makes plain we are to understand that Isaiah was speaking of Christ. Isaiah also spoke of the root out of dry ground (53:2). Both Old and New Testaments speak of the Stone, which the builders rejected but which became the head of the corner (Isa. 28:16; Matt. 21:42; Ps. 118:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-8). There is even more detail in today's verses but we have read enough Scripture to keep our minds and hearts fully occupied. Whatever else we take from this day's study, see clearly that it is the Person and Work of Jesus Christ that is the key to the whole of Scripture and holds all Scripture together. We shall see more of the thrill of this tomorrow.

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3:6-10

The single stone with seven eyes or facets (RSV) seems to speak of the perfection of all that God does. The reference to an inscription engraved on the stone is difficult to understand unless, perhaps, it has some reference to Exodus 28:9-12. The picture there is of the High Priest bearing the names of the tribes of Israel on his shoulders and on his heart as he intercedes in God's presence. In Exod. 28:36-38 there is reference to an engraved plate of gold set in the High Priest's turban, and Zechariah made specific reference to the turban (mitre AV) in 3:5. These things may be difficult for us to grasp but when we come to Zech. 3:9 the whole vision seems to focus on one single, specific day in which God will deal decisively with the whole issue of sin and guilt. That can only point forward to the day when the true High Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ, made full atonement for sin by the once-for-all sacrifice of Himself. This is spoken of wonderfully in the Epistle to the Hebrews where the language and symbolism are steeped in Old Testament worship and ritual. Read Hebrews 9:12, 23-26. Now think of all this in terms of the stirring of the work of rebuilding Jerusalem and going into the future. The people needed then, as we need now, to be assured that God Himself has dealt with the whole issue of sin. If we can but grasp the glory of the Gospel declaring that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ, then we would in great measure be set free to get on with the work God has given us to do. This would result not only in peaceful contentment and fellowship, as v.10 indicates, but also the invitation to others to come and to

share the blessings we have found in our God. This is the essence of evangelism: Come and see and share what we have found in God.

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4:1-6

Note three important things, as we continue to study these successive visions given to the prophet. They were given to him to give to the people to encourage them in God's work. They were not for the prophet's own spiritual indulgence. Spiritual gifts and blessings are given in order to make us servants of others. And they are *gifts*. We have no grounds for being spiritually proud (1 Cor. 4:7). Secondly, note how patiently God taught the prophet lesson after lesson, all in order to encourage, instruct and enable. No doubt Zechariah would recall again and again the lessons he was learning at this time and we, in like manner, need to store up God's lessons in our hearts even though we may not need the specific lesson right now. God teaches us line upon line, precept upon precept (Isa. 28:10,13) and He leads us forward step by step rather than by leaps and bounds, according as we are ready and able (Exod. 23:30; John 16:12). Note thirdly how the prophet was being made aware of God's perfect knowledge, perfect planning and perfect provision for all His work. There must have come upon Zechariah a great sense of being involved with God in a work far more glorious and far more sure than he had ever realised. This thought of being workers together with God (2 Cor. 6:1 AV) should awe us and thrill us, for it gives to us an importance that is far beyond our deserving and is indeed far beyond our expectations. Who would ever have thought that we should be called to play a significant part, under God, in His great plan of world redemption? The glory of the plan and the provision for it are the themes of this vision of the lampstand and the oil to keep it burning. We see here the answer to the prayer, "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning."

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4:1-6

God's purpose for His people Israel, and for His people down the ages, is that they should shine as lights in the world (Phil. 2:15). In Israel's worship the golden candlestick stood in the Tabernacle as a symbol of this calling (Exod. 25:31ff). Zechariah's candlestick seems even more elaborate, having seven lips for wicks on each of the seven cups. The light was greater than formerly and, of course, in due time the true light would come in Christ (Lk. 2:29-32; John 1:1-9; 8:12; 1 John 1:5; 2:8). The prophet would be aware of Israel's calling and thrilled by the thought of ever more glorious light shining. But how was this to be maintained? By the side of the lampstand Zechariah was shown, not containers of oil, but two olive trees, indicating an endless supply. The meaning of it all is declared in v.6. This is how the work is begun, maintained, progressed and finally completed. It is the work of God by His Holy Spirit. In the vision there is no sign of man at all. Man did not make the lampstand. The supply of oil did not come from man. There is no sign of priests tending the lamp and trimming the wicks, as there usually was in the Temple. If man is in this picture at all then he is the wick that carries the flame of light, and if he is doing this task properly he will not even be noticed. Man is but the instrument by which God shines His light, and all wicks need trimming if they are to function effectively. This explains much of what happens to us in daily experience under the hand of God who deals with us so that we might be all we should be (Heb. 12: 5-11). In order to benefit to the full from this particular vision we will quote tomorrow a passage from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress telling of Christian being taught in the House of the Interpreter.

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4:1-6

"The Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting water upon it, to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter ... The Interpreter said, 'This fire is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart; he that casts water upon it to put it out, is the devil: but in that thou seest the fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt see the reason of that.' So he had him round to the back of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of

which he did continually cast (but secretly) into the fire ... The Interpreter said, 'This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of His people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire; this is to teach thee, that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul"'. This is just one of the many insights Bunyan gives into deep spiritual truth and experience. It is a lesson we all need to learn because one of the most desolating and demoralising things in Christian life and service is the feeling that we are on our own, with nothing but our own resources. This is simply not true if we are believers. If we have Christ then we have the Holy Spirit, not just ministering to us but dwelling in our hearts. This is something we need to grasp and to count on and the New Testament is gloriously clear and affirmative about it. Read Rom. 8:9-11, 26-27; Eph. 1:15-20; 3:14-21, and "think what Spirit dwells within thee" (Hymn, Jesus I my cross have taken, by Lyte). Then remember that in all Christian life and service, whatever our task may be, it is God, by His Spirit, who does the work (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

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4:7-14

We come now to the practical application of the vision in terms of encouragement to the people to get on with the business and hard work of building Jerusalem in preparation for the future. We do not need to go into every detail of what is after all a *vision* rather than a statement or thesis. All that God has been saying about the free and sovereign working of His Holy Spirit is now placed over against the mountain of difficulty and obstruction facing Zerubbabel and Joshua as they exercised leadership in the work. No doubt these human leaders were staggered by the vastness of the work, conscious of their own weakness and limitation, and grieved by the pessimism and lethargy of the people. But God declares that by the working of His Spirit the obstacles will be demolished and the top stone of the building would be set in its place amidst shouts of rejoicing. And, what is more, the present leader of the work would see it through to the end. It would all be the work of God's grace and there was no doubt about it. What God says, God does and no one can prevent it (Isa. 46:3-5,8-11; 43:11-13; Gen. 28:15; Phil. 1:6). We have good grounds for having confidence in God because He has complete confidence in Himself. He has no doubts about what He is doing, how He is doing it, nor about the victorious completion. Think of the God who brought order out of chaos at the time of creation: God spoke and it was done (Gen. 1:3). By the same Spirit God spoke and revealed Himself to men for their enlightenment (1 Pet. 1:10-12), giving them His Word to make them wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15-16). By the same mighty and eternal Spirit which Zechariah was told about, God worked salvation in Christ (Heb. 9:14). In every aspect of salvation and service it is not by human might, ingenuity or passion, but by God's Spirit that the work is done.

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4:7-14

In v.10a we seem to have a prophecy to the effect that even those who had earlier moaned about difficulty and impossibility, who had said, "What's the point? It can't be done," and who said, "Things will never be as good or as great as in the old days," would in fact join in the rejoicing. We can but hope that they would admit that they had lacked faith and that they had been a burden of discouragement to their leaders and a hindrance to the work in its early, formative stages. It is amazing how the Lord works in spite of our unbelief and, when our doubts and fears have been shown to be groundless, then we are glad to testify that the Lord has indeed done great things for us (Ps. 126:1-6). From v.10b onwards there is difficulty in understanding exactly what the details mean. The seven eyes of the Lord seem to refer back to the seven lamps and if so we have the symbolism of God's watchful presence among and over His people, and now the same guardian eyes watching over the whole earth and all its activity. Then there is the question of the olive trees, their branches and the pipes which pour out the oil. We are still in the realm of God's purposes of grace, God's Spirit in His ceaseless activity, and God's servants. In 3:8 we were told about the Branch. Now there are two branches and two anointed ones. There seems to be reference here to God's two anointed servants leading the work at that time: Joshua and Zerubbabel. They are spoken of as standing beside the Lord of the whole earth. One was a prince while the other was a priest and, since the anointed one is the Messiah, then we are being pointed forward here to the Messiah, Jesus. He is

the one who brings us in forgiveness to God and who rules and reigns over us. Many of the things in the Bible that we do not understand fully are still able to point us on to Him who is our Prophet, Priest and King.

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5:1-4

God continued to speak to Zechariah by means of visions, first to encourage the prophet and then, through him, to put heart into the people as they tackled their work. One thing that has to be grasped firmly is that God is not just an observer or spectator. He is active in His righteous providence. This is the theme here. The people were aware of the operations of evil in the life of the nation, and so was God. Mention was made in 3:9b of the guilt of the land, and in 4:10b we were told of the eyes of the Lord seeing everything. Now we are told of God's edict and action of judgment against all unrighteousness. The scroll was a huge placard some ten yards by five yards. It is assumed that there was writing on it, signifying that the message was permanent. It was unrolled, and thus open rather than secret. It was flying through the air, sent by God to carry out His specific purpose, and was in fact already operative. It searched out every place and person involved in evil activity. It was in fact the curse of God's righteous judgment. But it was not merely a pronouncement or a revelation of God's judgment; it was the executive power of that judgment. So vivid was the scroll and so clear its message none would be able to plead ignorance and everything would be exposed. There would be neither hiding place nor escape. All is open and known to God (Heb. 4:13) and all will be revealed (Matt. 10:26). This searching judgment by God, although applicable to all the earth, is primarily applied here to the land of Israel. It is God's people who are challenged about dealing rightly with others (stealing) and about dealing rightly with God (swearing falsely). After all, if God's people are not right in themselves and in their dealings with God and other people then the work will be undermined even as it progresses.

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5:1-4

We stay with these verses, not to go into further details of the vision which, in essence, was a vast advertising hoarding calculated to catch the attention of even casual passers-by. On one level the message of God's judgment of sin is a very solemn one, and such a message is a basic part of the Gospel, as Paul makes plain in Rom. 1:18ff. But on the other hand, for those whose daily work brings them face to face with evil "red in tooth and claw", and who see both human evil in its ruthlessness and also the awful results of what men and women do to others because of their lust, greed and depravity, it must be a comfort to realise that someone can and does confront evil to bring it to judgment. At times we are faced with the fact that the evil we see has gone beyond mere human badness and we are forced to recognise the demonic and devilish element in it. It is frightening even to use the phrase "the demonising of society" but passages such as Ephesians 6:10ff compel us to recognise that we are not battling with mere flesh and blood, our own or that of others. There is a Devil, and that fact combined with the sickness and perversity of fallen human nature (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9), makes the world a frightening place. If we were not persuaded that God holds the reins, that the Devil and his kingdom have been decisively defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that God is in fact, at all times and in all places, dealing with evil, exposing it and judging it, we would rightly be afraid. There is a time to speak and act against the Devil, his work and his agents. But we do not avenge ourselves. That belongs to God and to God alone (Rom.12:19).

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5:5-11

This is indeed a glorious vision. Wickedness, symbolised by the woman, is pushed down into the measuring basket (ephah AV) and a heavy lid is clamped on. No matter the raging and threshing of evil, the basket is lifted up effortlessly and carried away to its place of banishment. It is a satisfying vision, not least because it reveals that the spirit of evil, in spite of all its operations and manifestations, is by no means the powerful force it thinks itself to be. The Devil may be a problem to us, but is no problem to God. We need to be clear about this. Sometimes it seems that God grants evil a great deal of room and freedom to operate and that can perplex us.

That was what the Psalmist felt in Ps. 73:1-17. The appointed end for evil comes in due time. Until then, the wrath of men serves the purpose of God and if what men desire to do is unnecessary for God's purposes then men are restrained (Ps. 76:10 AV). God frustrates evil (Ps. 7:14-16) and evil men and women discover that they cannot put into operation the schemes they have planned (Ps. 21:11). It does not always seem to be so. But, just as God waited for the fulness of time before He sent His Son into the world (Gal. 4:4) so He waits until iniquity reaches its full pitch before it is brought to judgment (Gen. 15:16; Matt. 13:24-30). Remember that when Jesus chose the Twelve, among them He chose a man He knew was evil. But Judas, although at the heart of the work of Jesus, was no threat and the time came when Jesus commanded him to do what he had to do and to do it there and then. What a comfort this should be! We must not fear evil even when it has a human face, as the woman certainly had, nor even when it is half hidden in the basket. The Devil's time is strictly limited, and that is perhaps why he is so angrily active (Rev. 12:12). He can be overcome, because Christ has overcome him.

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5:5-11

Some commentators give a more local and immediate meaning to this vision in two different ways. Evil has to be taken seriously, because it seems that the "woman" was struggling to get out of the confinement of the basket. But evil takes different forms. It is suggested that there may be reference here to the presence of pagan peoples living in the land alongside the Jews and the danger of their attitudes and influences infecting God's people in a way that would turn them away from God. Such people had to be removed to their own place. Sometimes people who profess and claim to be God's own people have become so involved with worldliness and its evil spirit (even when educated and cultured) that they too have to go. There is a "separation" from evil that is quite vital (2 Cor. 6:14-18) and there is a departing of people from a fellowship and work that has to be seen as an evidence of the fact that they were never really part of it (1 John 2:19). Even Jesus spoke of people professing allegiance and evidencing spiritual service who were never part of Him or His work (Matt. 7:21-23). That which hinders and stands in the way of the progress and development of God's work; that which is causing God's people to stumble, God will take away. But it may be that the wickedness (8) (actual sins), the iniquity (6) (the spirit of evil), and the spirit of disobedience (Eph. 2:1-3) are that of God's true people. If that is so then God was removing it as far as east is from west (Ps. 103:12). Note that the wind was in the wings of the storks, and the wind so often speaks of the mighty Spirit of God. This final dealing with sin and iniquity is the sovereign work of God. He takes it all away and by that same Spirit gives His people a new heart and new desires, and it will be God's delight to bless them (Jer. 32:37-41; Ezek. 36:24-28).

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6:1-8

Note how much emphasis there is on Zechariah "seeing", that is, becoming aware of who and what is there all the time. What we should have been seeing in the first five chapters is God: the God who saves His people, working for them, in them and through them. The work, the plan, the power, the providence and the glory all belong to Him. This is a God to rejoice in and to be encouraged and reassured by, because there is a sureness in all that belongs to God. God's will is done, on earth as it is in Heaven, and it is our confidence, the confidence of faith, that says, "Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the Glory, for ever." Here the prophet is shown horses pulling chariots and we recall the very first vision in 1:7-11, which is specifically stated to be a night-time vision. It is suggested by some that the colours in this vision indicate it is at dawn, the beginning of a new day. That may mean that the promises of the earlier visions are about to be fulfilled and this, of course, would be a tremendous encouragement and inspiration to those working with dedication to build for the future. For us it means we should always be looking for evidences of God at work. The "slow watches of the night" when nothing seems to be happening, are as much part of God's significant working as those times when we have clear evidences of His blessing. This is one reason why we must always be ready for God. Our time-scale and His are different. A thousand years and a day are much the same to the God of eternity (Ps. 90:1-4; 2 Pet. 3:3-4,8-13). Do we not sing, "Today the noise of battle, the next the victor's song"? As believers we have grounds for living with a spirit of expectation.

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6:1-8

If the first vision of horsemen signified patrolling, reporting and protecting, this vision speaks of execution, the active providence of God, and His universal sovereignty whereby He subdues the nations. If we link v.1,5 we see that the mountains of brass represent the gateway of Heaven because the horsemen had presented themselves before God. Zechariah may have thought at this point of the pillars of the Temple described in 1 Kings 7:15,21. The message is of the impregnable stronghold of God and the absoluteness of His power. What a God to have as a rock, refuge and strong tower in which to hide (Ps. 46:1; 61:1-3)! But we are not hiding in this vision. We are watching God's chariots, His storm-troops, His trained commandos going forth at His initiative. Zechariah is told that God's executive powers go to the four corners of the compass. There is a throb of power and eagerness in the picture of the horses coming forth and pawing the ground but there is also total control until the command to go is given (7). There is nothing impetuous or exaggerated about God's activity. Everything is controlled and exact. We must remember this also when we become aware of the reality of evil in the world, whether human or demonic evil. Never think that the Devil is a free agent. He must serve the will of God at God's appointed time. Think of how Judas was told by Jesus to do what he had to do and to do it right then (John 13:27). His evil intention had been known from the start (John 6:70), and the initiative and direction had been in Jesus' power until the right moment came. The message in v.8 is cried aloud, signifying its importance. But what does it mean? It seems to suggest that the most significant world power of evil in the north had also been brought to judgment and God was at rest because no more needed to be done. It also suggests that future events, just as present and past events, have to be seen as the work of God's mighty, unfettered Spirit. Nothing can prevent God's perfect victory.

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6:9-15

Before going further consider what we have learned thus far. There have been eight visions given to Zechariah for the people, and the message has been encouragement for the present situation and hope and assurance for the future. We have been taught to have confidence in God who holds the world and all its issues in His own sure hand. Right at the start we read that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah (1:1) and we have read again and again of how God spoke to His people through the prophet (1:17; 2:8; 3:6; 4:6, 8; 5:4; 6:9). When God speaks, and He speaks to us now through His Word which He has given (2 Tim. 3:16-17) and which is complete, not to be added to (Rev. 22: 18-19), it is vitally important that we should listen and that we should receive the Word in faith (Heb. 4: 1-2). It is by faith that we cope with the present and it is by faith that we lay hold on the future, believing that what God has said God will do, even if at the moment it seems impossible (Rom. 4:18-21). Faith is being sure of what we do not see and it is also by faith that we see, count on and live by things unseen (Heb. 11:1,27; 2 Cor. 4:18). Faith believes that God's Word is not bound, that it will accomplish God's purpose, and that that purpose will be brought to completeness (2 Tim. 2:9; Isa. 55:8-11; Phil. 1:6). Remember that these messages and visions were being given to Zechariah and the people when things were by no means easy.

Perhaps the prophet was becoming overwhelmed by the sheer dimension of the revelations being given and the high spiritual realm he was being drawn into. That is why God spoke to him in 6:9ff. in a particularly human way as we shall see tomorrow.

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6:9-15

The people mentioned in v.10 were exiles returned recently from Babylon, carrying gifts of gold and silver to help the work in Jerusalem. Their coming would have been an encouragement and a reminder that there were many who, though not actually with them in the city, were their partners in prayer and practical support. Of course, it could also have been a reminder that then, as now, many would rather give donations than commit themselves to the work in a personal way. Some commentators point out that the names of these men are significant: Heldai - the Lord's world; Tobijah - the Lord is my good; Jedaiah God cares for; Josiah - the Lord

supports; and Zephaniah - the Lord hides. Note how God is in the names. It suggests that even in captivity, backslidden from God, parents still had some measure of faith and hope and this was expressed in the names given to their children. That fact would not be lost on Zechariah and his congregation and would remind them of the fact that a relationship with God lay at the foundation of their whole life and service. It would remind them of God's attitude to them in spite of all their failures. They were still the apple of His eye and His love for them was really beyond understanding (Hos. 11:8). We also need to be reminded of this and encouraged by it. The price God paid for our redemption is outwith the calculation of all the Monetary Funds of the world. Read 1 Pet. 1:18-20 and marvel at the extent to which God was prepared to go for our salvation.

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6:9-15

A crown, which symbolises kingship, was to be placed on the head of Joshua the High Priest. The King who is to rule God's people is also the Priest who ministers to them. By His ministry He enters God's presence on their behalf and by His sacrifice He makes atonement for the people. We have already spoken of the One who is the Branch (3:8) and here again the very words "Behold the man" (v.12 AV) ("Here is the man" NIV) make us think of Jesus who is in Himself Prophet, Priest and King. Jesus Christ is God's full and final word to mankind (Heb. 1:1-3). Jesus is our great High Priest who understands us, feels for us, acts on our behalf, and ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-16; 7:25; 9:24). He is also the king who rules and defends us and makes it His business to restrain and conquer all His and our enemies. Those who have the Shorter Catechism should read and study Questions 23-26. We need to be reminded again and again that Christ is everything we need. This is as true about our Christian service as it is of our salvation and life. It is this glorious One who will build the Temple of the Lord, and the gates of hell will not be able to prevent it or to stand against it. This is what Jesus said in Matt. 16:18. Today's passage, as with many Old Testament prophecies, is intended to point us forward beyond the contemporary situation facing Zechariah to the day when One would come who would bring to pass all God's promises of salvation. There is difficulty in understanding v.13b. It may refer to Joshua as the Priest and Zerubbabel the lay leader working in total harmony for the good of God's people and work. But we can still think of Jesus, clothed in majesty and royal honour, functioning as both king and priest for the peace and blessing of His people. Think of some of the hymns we love to sing: words that refer to "Him who sits upon the throne"; "Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne" (the word "crown" in our passage is actually plural); "All hail the power of Jesus' name, and crown Him Lord of all". If this difficult passage makes us think of the King of Kings then our study has been valid.

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6:9-15

The last two verses have an important message. A crown was to be laid up in the Temple so that the people would never forget the glorious significance of this "word" from God. It would be important for future generations to be reminded of the costly work done by those who had gone before (John 4:38) and to be reminded constantly of the One who was, is, and always shall be Priest and King. The same reminder is given at every Communion Service, and we need to be brought again and again to the centralities of salvation. But then in v.15 we are made to lift up our eyes and our expectations because we are told of how a great company of those far away will come to help build the Temple. This cannot mean just the Temple being built in Zechariah's time because it was well on its way. It speaks of an ingathering of Gentiles as well as Jews from all the nations, and their coming will be part of the building of that spiritual Temple that Peter speaks of (1 Pet. 2:4-5), a Temple of living stones, a heavenly Temple (2 Cor. 5:1). What we have to think about is the building of God's spiritual Temple, a work going on down through the ages of history and progressing positively, regardless of circumstances or appearances. We must be confident of this and thrill to it, and see to it that in relation to God's work we are found obedient. It is this note of obedience that ends the section of the prophecy given by way of visions. Read Paul's marvellous words in Eph. 2:8-10, 12-13, 19-22. This is the truth about ourselves and our work in Christ.

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7:1-3

Two full years have passed since Zechariah first spoke the Word of the Lord (1:1). Commentators argue at length about the translation of these verses and it is not clear whether this deputation was from Bethel, twelve miles from Jerusalem, or from men of Bethel who were still in Babylon. Remember that away back in 1 Kings 12:25-33 Bethel had been made an "opposition" place of worship with its own fasts and observances, and it seems that now the "traditionalists" from Bethel were asking questions about what was the "right" way to worship. The Temple was well on the way to being rebuilt. A new stage in the life, work and worship of the people of God was beginning. Was it right and necessary to keep on observing certain "fasts" as it had always been done for so many years? If this deputation came from Babylon, some commentators suggest the motive behind the question was a desire to reduce the number of holy days required to be observed by the Jews so that there would be less clash with the attitudes of the secular authorities in Babylon. There is always a temptation to modify spiritual principles so that we will not "rock the boat". On the other hand the question could well have been totally genuine on the part of people who, though not actually in Jerusalem and not practically participating in the rebuilding, still wanted to be part of this new thing that God was doing in their generation. The fasts referred to (the full list is in 8:19) were memorials of tragic moments in the collapse of Jerusalem and had been observed for all the years of captivity. But religious ceremonial, whether of divine institution or human tradition, can easily become empty and meaningless tradition if it does not bring the heart to God in spiritual worship, and the life to God in practical obedience. The answer given to the questioners by the Word of the Lord was a searching one.

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7:4-7

The fasts mentioned in 7:3-4; 8:19 relate to the capture of Jerusalem (Jer. 39:2-3) in the fourth month; the fifth month commemorated the burning of the Temple (2 Kings 25:8-9); the seventh month marked the murder of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:25; Jer. 41:1-3); and the tenth month marked the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:1). All these tragic events would have been burned into the minds of the Jews but the institution of official "fasts" to commemorate them was a human action rather than a command by God. The question raised by the men of Bethel seemed very spiritual but they were challenged as to whether their fasts served to commemorate their own unhappiness or the Lord's dealings with them because of their spiritual and moral disobedience and failure. Religion can so easily become self-indulgent, saying "Poor me! Isn't life hard on me? How I wish the happy days of long ago were here again." That kind of religious attitude is negative and destructive psychologically as well as spiritually. But even scrupulous spiritual observance (including daily Bible reading and praying) can become a substitute for dealing with God and can look more to the approval of others than of God (Matt. 6:16-18). Indeed, we can be so focused on our own spirituality that we almost become critical of God for not dealing with us more generously. Read Isa. 58:1-14, especially v.2-5. We are really anticipating Zechariah's answer in tomorrow's verses so we concentrate on v.5-6 where God asks why we do certain spiritual exercises. Are we really turning our hearts to God and dealing with Him? In Jesus' days those most scrupulous about observances (and critical of those more lax) were charged with evading the real claims of spiritual religion (Matt. 23:23-26).

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7:8-14

The men who asked if it would be unfaithful to God and to the past to abandon some traditional fasts got a very straight-from-the-shoulder answer and were referred to the preaching of the prophets of former days, preaching which their fathers had refused. There can be no moving into a new spiritual future without recognising that the present spiritual barrenness is the result of spiritual wrong. The remedy does not lie in saying the right things or adjusting forms of worship. Former prophets like Isaiah spoke plainly about "temple treading" and multiplication of services and God's revulsion against religion that does not lead to good, right and gracious lives (Isa. 1:11-17). Justice, kindness, mercy, love, loyalty and care for people are the things God looks for in a

people spiritually awakened. God looks for a sense of responsibility for others and an absence of exploitation. This is what is called for from a people whom God has redeemed and saved. This is the proof of a real work of grace in the heart because faith that is not manifested in good works and in heart response to God is not real (Jas. 2:14-17; Eph. 2:8-10). But this was the true "religion" which the former generation had refused so doggedly (11-12). Now that a door of opportunity had been opened for the future, and renewed fellowship with God and service for God were possible, the new generation had to recognise the terrible danger and consequences of sitting lightly to the Word of God. It was as if God was saying, "Go back to the past and learn the lessons of their spiritual disaster." Read Jeremiah 7:1-16, 21-28. The privileges of being God's people and His servants can be forfeited.

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7:8-14

The burden of these verses is that a people who were God's people could pass through such strong and costly experiences and reverses and yet not learn the spiritual lessons that would give them hope for the future. The way forward was not by better ceremonial but by better lives. There is a profound lesson in v.13, not least regarding the matter of prayer. We are told of times when God refuses to hear and remains silent. The principle seems just and right because we must not ever think that God stands mildly by to be called on when it suits us or when we have some particular set of circumstances that we find irksome and that is making us unhappy. Note the development of the argument. The people refused the message and hardened their hearts. That speaks of deliberate actions. In doing so they closed up the throne of grace against themselves and their nation and this led to a throne of judgment. A spiritual work that had been a blessing to the nations was brought down and the people scattered. Think of churches that once were veritable fountains of blessing, oases in the desert of broken down society, and places of salvation and refuge for the hungry-hearted, and now they are simply places of formal, lifeless religion. God's message is clear and plain. It is easy, but pointless, to respond to the situation by observing fasts to mourn spiritual losses. It is much harder to face and respond to God's demands for the present and the future. If their spiritual fasts brought desire and gave incentive to respond to God and to the new thing He had begun to do, then there would indeed be hope for the future.

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8:1-3

The end of chapter 7 left the people very aware of all they had lost because of their spiritual disobedience and they might have felt that was the end of the story. But God's chastening, however comprehensive, strong and long-lasting, is not the end but rather the means of grace to bring His people to a new and richer future. That is the burden of Hebrews 12:5-11. Immediately after the stern words of rebuke by which God interpreted their experiences for them, God speaks of His love for them. When the prophet says, "Thus says the Lord," he is simply urging the people to listen carefully and eagerly so that they will become aware of how much God loves them; how much He wants them back in fellowship, back in service and back in the richness of His blessing. There is no doubt about God's intentions as v.3 indicates, and that must have meant a great deal to Jewish minds and hearts which would sense the contrast with "the glory departed" (1 Sam. 4:21). This word of love, hope, future service and blessing was spoken to people who were all set to go on fasting and mourning because of what had happened in the past. They had to realise their time of discipline was over. They had received from the Lord's hand the full punishment for their sin and failure and now the future was opening up and their God was coming to them (Isa. 40:1-5). Now it is one thing to feel deeply that you want to get back to God, but it is far more wonderful to be told that the heart of God is simply aching in love to come back to you. We are told here of the faithfulness of the God who has committed Himself to His people in a covenant of redeeming love. Not only so, the restoring love of God will make His people as faithful as Himself, as opposed to sin as Himself, and as secure as Himself (like a mountain). That this kind of future should be promised to a people who had failed so signally is a glorious demonstration of the love of God (1 John 3:1-3; Joel 2:25 AV)

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8:4-5

There is a profound lesson here for society and for the church, both of which have a tendency to isolate age groups from each other. The image and pattern of the Jerusalem, the society and church, which God holds out as ideal in His blessing, speaks of children and old people together along with the work-force which is busy with the labour and administration. Just as in a family, so in a congregation all ages need each other. The children are not in the restored Jerusalem for what they *can* do nor for what they *will* do when they grow up; they are there just for themselves, playing in safety and happiness. The old people are not shunted away into enclaves of redundancy, nor are they expected to labour as they did in their youth, for that would be unreasonable. They too are there for themselves and as a reminder that the new generation has entered into their labour, and they have the satisfaction of seeing the work going on. Old people thrill when they see young folk and children in church, and old people who have lived through demanding and costly times with none of the luxuries the younger generation regard as essential have a great deal of wisdom, balance and patience to impart. Note the word "again" in v.4. This reminds us that the prophet is speaking of something that once was the case but had been lost, and one application of this is that we should pray for the restoration of the "family pew" in church and that we might see younger and younger people sharing with adults the whole service of worship, including the sermon, even though they may not yet be able to understand much of it. All ages gathered together for worship is the biblical pattern and the returned exiles already knew something of this as Nehemiah 8:1-3 makes plain.

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8:6-8

In relation to yesterday's verses and the lovely picture of a God-blessed society, some who have been to Israel in recent years may have seen in the newly built areas of housing that there are in fact play areas for children right in the midst of the houses. This is done because the Jews are mindful of Zechariah's prophecy. Compare that with so many soulless areas of housing in our own cities. So wonderful is the picture of blessing that people would be tempted to think it is too good to be true. It is certainly too wonderful for man to do on his own but we must not reduce God to our puny size. We must not limit the possibilities. Did not God say to Abraham in a situation he thought impossible: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14); and did not the angel say to Mary, "With God, nothing shall be impossible," (Lk. 1:37)? The promises made by God in v.7, 8 are promises to stand on, because what God says He will certainly do. This is the commitment of the unchanging God whose faithfulness is indeed great and whose mercies are renewed day by day (Lamentations 3:22-23). It is little wonder that the Bible calls us to "have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) because even when we are unfaithful He remains faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). The promises here apply far beyond the immediate time of Zechariah and we need, for example, to go back as far as Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and Jacob in Gen. 28:15 and then on to the affirmation that we so often fail to grasp when we celebrate Christmas: "He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Go back to the promise God made while He was in the process of sending His people into the discipline of captivity and see there the marvel of the fixed intention of His love (Jer. 32:36-42). Read also Jer. 29:10-14. It is with a God like this that we face the future.

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8:9-13

We go into the future with the sure promises of God and with His provision, but we are called to be strong rather than weak, and to work rather than be complacent and lazy. In the whole of chap. 8 we have no less than ten words of encouragement from God (2,3,4,6,7, 9, 14, 19, 20, 23) and these follow no less than eight visions of hope and encouragement in the earlier chapters. It is little wonder that the God who promises also calls us to be strong, and does so at specific times when we are being called to go forward into new developments of service. Think of the call to courage and commitment given to Joshua when, no doubt, he and the people were wondering how they would cope without the leadership of the mighty man Moses (Josh. 1:1-9). Think how the trembling young prophet Isaiah was reassured by a vision of the glory of God when he and the people were in measure demoralised by the death of King Uzziah who had reigned for so long (Isa. 6:1-4). Think of how the

disheartened and confused disciples after the Cross were reassured and commissioned by the appearance of the Risen Christ (Matt. 28:16-20). In today's verses the significant basis of the encouragement was the fact that there was amongst them a renewing of the ministry of God's Word. Whenever there is a reinstatement of true biblical preaching the people of God have grounds for hope no matter how derelict the situation may be that they have inherited. Think of the significant time of Samuel when the Word of the Lord was scarce and the ministers of the Word were discredited (1 Sam. 3:1). Then God raised up a true prophet and soon the nation knew there was a God who spoke (1 Sam. 3:19-4:1a). This is a word to young ministers and missionaries. Have confidence in God and in His Word.

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8:9-13

God seeks to encourage and inspire His people to get down to the work by contrasting the present with the immediate past. He reminds the people just how bleak and negative the situation had been when the exiles first returned. There was neither finance nor security and there was constant enmity and friction. We can read about it in Ezra and Nehemiah. But there was also the ministry of the prophets (possibly a reference to Ezra 8:1-8 and more likely to Haggai 1:6-11; 2:15-19). The ministry was challenging, very much to the point. It had its effect and the people got down to work. That is always a good sign! A spiritual work cannot be built securely for the future without a great deal of sheer hard work and ongoing slog. Yes, there must be prayer, but there must be those who work and do so willingly regardless of the many who never seem to do their share. We must work because we love the Lord and we do our work as unto the Lord (Col. 3:17). God's word through Zechariah was very clear. He recognised that there was only a remnant of the people compared to the great numbers of former days but that was no hindrance. The former days ended in decline and barrenness but now there was to be sowing and reaping, the blessing of heaven, and a taking possession of the land in the name of the Lord. What is more, there was to be a recovery of their witness (13) and their very presence among the nations would be a blessing that would bring life and peace. Because this was God's plan and purpose for them they are called to banish their fears and let their hands be strong to do the Lord's work. What a call, and what a privilege!

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8:14-19

The people were now made to think of the time, then far past, when God in His displeasure resolved to discipline His people and to do so in a way that sent them, their name and their work into obscurity for seventy years. The people were not allowed to think that the Captivity was simply an unfortunate result of national economics and international politics. It had been God's doing. But just as that sore discipline had been carried out with deliberate resolution by God (Jer. 4:27-28), so His people would now be led into blessing with the same glorious resolution. God was going to bless His people and no-one was going to stop Him. Of course, there had been repentance, a return to God and a commitment to His work of re-building. But note how God warned His people not to let wrong lives and wrong attitudes hinder and spoil this new plan and purpose of blessing. Verses 16-17 need no comment or exposition save to note that this call to moral responsibility comes after God's declared intention to bless His people. It is to a people who are recipient of saving grace that the call to right behaviour and right relationships comes. We see this exemplified in the New Testament in that after the great exposition of salvation by grace alone in Ephesians 1-3 there follows the call to Christian living in Eph. 4:1-3,25-5:4. Note that God says through Zechariah that He recoils and draws away from His people when these wrong things of behaviour are manifested among them. Then in v.18-19 we are given the answer to the question asked in 7:1-3. If they must remember these feast days, then let it be done, not in a gloomy spirit of indulgent misery, but in a spirit of glad thanksgiving because God has taken back and reinstated the prodigal people. How grateful we should be that "the past shall be forgotten, a present joy be given, a future grace be promised, a glorious crown in heaven." (That is God's gracious promise "however great our trespass, whatever we have been, however long from mercy we may have turned away" (Hymn "Today Thy mercy calls us" -Allen) What a God and what a Gospel!

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8:20-23

Would not our heart thrill if our neighbours and friends spoke words like these and asked if they could come to church with us? When God's people are true to Him and to each other, when the hearts of God's people are warm towards their God and their prayers are earnest, when the honour of God and of His House mean more than anything else, then there will be a grace about God's people that will attract others. This is not self-conscious witness, but rather a clear, clean life reflecting the sunshine of the love of God. But note that this witness, this evangelism, and this ingathering are all set in the context of the activity of God's Spirit who awakens people in the most unexpected places to the realities of spiritual needs (John 16:7-9). It is God alone who creates hunger and thirst in people's hearts and causes them to seek after Him. Note also the emphasis on the fact that there was a place to gather to: Jerusalem, a place which even outsiders recognised to be a place where God was known and where God spoke His salvation. This is what churches should be but, alas, so often it is not the case. Unless there is a true spirit of worship and a clear word from the Word the people who come will not be aware of God and they will not come back. Note also that there were people clearly recognisable by their way of life as God's believing people. When the hungry outsiders ask to be allowed to accompany God's people they feel sure they will not be denied. But what if some come to church and no-one speaks to them? What does it mean if we see a newcomer sitting in church all alone but the row behind and the row in front fully occupied by Christians who are there every Sunday? It means something is wrong.

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9:1-8

So far in Zechariah the emphasis has been on God's encouragement of and reassuring promises to His people who were engaged in building the work of God for the future. Now the tone and atmosphere seem to change and God utters His word against the enemies of His people. Keep in mind that for a long, long time Israel had been at the receiving end of all manner of attack, persecution, contempt, ridicule, with her land over-run and her Temple reduced to rubble. During all the years of painful and costly re-building the powers of the unbelieving world had resisted and persecuted and done everything possible to stop the building of God's saving work. Using terms like these we can see that we must always look beyond the mere national and international conflicts and understand these strong passages in a spiritual way, although these events and battles did in fact occur in the immediate history of the prophet's time. We have a list of powerful nations mentioned in our passage, all of whom had worked and fought bitterly against Israel. Now the Lord of all the earth declared that their time of rebuke and judgment had come. God Himself was to deal with them and bring them low using, of course, other rising nations. The reference may be to the coming victories of Alexander the Great who conquered the whole of the then known world and then wept because there was nothing more to conquer. What we have to see in the stern outworking of history is the sovereign activity of God in mercy *and* in judgment in the inter-play of world forces. Never think of God as having been banished from the world. He may not "bang His drum" as world leaders do, but it is God's will that is done on earth as it is in heaven. We can be sure of this!

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9:1-8

We cannot go into the details of all these nations mentioned, but Tyre and Sidon had been proud, arrogant and seemingly invincible in their power. The announcement that they were to be swept away (as happened two hundred years later at the hands of Alexander) must have alarmed the Philistines because they could be next. These nations were to lose their identity and become a mongrel people, and that puts an end to national pride. Think of how much of Scotland is now owned by absent, foreign landlords, and how much of Britain's commerce is owned and controlled by overseas agencies. National pride can easily be taken away in God's providential judgments. Things do not happen by accident. There are moral and spiritual causes, and no remedy on a mere political or economic level will change the situation. It calls for repentance and a return to God, but in our land there is little awareness of such a need. Now, in the midst of this solemn warning from God, we read the most astonishing statement in v.6b-7. In the midst of judgment God speaks of salvation, and in wrath He

does indeed remember mercy (Hab. 3:2). The Philistines were going to be humbled, their abominations of religion were going to be taken away, a new spirit was going to be manifested among them and a remnant of them was going to be incorporated into Israel. There was going to be a work of salvation in that most unpromising area of the world. In like manner Ekron was to be spared, just as the Jebusites had been spared in the time of Joshua (Josh. 15:63). This work of mercy should not surprise us, especially in view of the prediction in 8:20-23. Why should we think that there are "no-go areas" in relation to God's saving grace? God's Spirit is not limited, and God's desire is that people everywhere should be saved (2 Pet. 3:9).

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9:1-8

There is still a wonderfully comforting lesson to learn from this passage but first, in order to keep clear in our minds the activity of God in the contortions and developments of history, read 2 Peter 3:1-10. The outworking of God's sovereign purposes of grace and salvation takes time, but there is neither delay nor uncertainty. We must be at peace in our hearts because the issues are in God's hands alone (Ps. 68:20 AV). Jesus Himself spoke vividly in Matthew 24 about the turmoil and travail of the end of world history, but He also spoke the wonderful words, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk. 12:32). We are told in the New Testament of the assurance of Christ regarding the ultimate victory when every knee shall bow in heaven, earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 10:12-13; 1 Cor. 15:24-25). What has all this to do with Zechariah? Read v.8, which tells of God present in Person and in glorious power to stand guard over His people and their work. Fear not, little flock! God's Word, God's power and God's activity are always there in the interest of His people's salvation and blessing. Read Exodus 3:7-8; 14:21-25 and take special note of God looking down upon the whole situation. In Zechariah note how God speaks of "My house" and when He refers to "them" He means "My people." We quoted recently in preaching the hymn,

"Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?

Jesus we know, and He is on the throne." (Bickersteth)

Let it be said yet again: "Fear not, little flock."

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9:9-13

No one will want to go further than the first verse of this passage and that is a right attitude. After all, all the kings and deliverers spoken of in relation to God's people are but pointers forward to the King of Kings who, when He comes, works deliverance once for all, securing the salvation of His people (Heb. 9:12). In the context of the narrative of God's deliverance, vindication, salvation and establishment of His people, we are introduced without warning to the King whose coming is to be the cause of Jerusalem's rejoicing. Any thought of a merely earthly king, however powerful, like Alexander of the Greek Empire, fades into the background in the light of God's true, kingly deliverer. What we have here is what we find in many prophecies, namely the mingling of the near and far situation. The theme is, of course, God's raising up of a deliverer for His people. We cannot tell to what extent Zechariah was consciously looking beyond His own generation and the next but he was certainly *speaking* to generations far beyond his own. This is what we read in 1 Peter 1:10-12. Being a well-taught Jew, Zechariah would, like all Jews, be aware of the promise and expectation of Messiah, God's anointed Saviour. Just who that Saviour would be, what His character would be, and how He would carry out His work were not too clearly defined. The idea of a conquering king appealed, but that of a suffering servant did not. A political Messiah was acceptable but a spiritual Messiah who spoke about being meek and lowly in heart and of paying tribute to Caesar did not meet with much enthusiasm. Perhaps for today we should simply consider what kind of Saviour we want and what we want Him to do for us. Then we must compare our thoughts with those of Scripture.

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9:9-13

Zechariah would have known of how Cyrus, a pagan ruler, had been the Lord's anointed to bring about the return from captivity (Isa. 45:1). He may have had some clear idea or concept of God raising up a world - ruler to bring about the transformation spoken of in 9:1-8. Being in the true sense a far-seeing prophet he could well have been aware that these "messages" he was speaking to the people brought together the actions of political power and the outworking of the purposes of God. This, of course, is what happened in the time of Jesus. The great secular power of Rome had brought a real measure of peace. The Jews as a nation had once again been humbled under an alien government because of their spiritual pride and failure. They looked for a deliverer and He came, riding into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday exactly in the pattern of Zechariah's prophecy, and He was recognised as the fulfilment of that prophecy. Read Matt. 21:1-11 and

John 12:12-16 and note that the gospels quote only v.9 of Zechariah. There is no mention of the peace that the King would bring. Compare this with Jesus' quoting from Isa. 61:1-2 in Lk. 4:18-19 and omitting the prophet's reference to the day of God's vengeance. We have to see in the Old Testament prophecies application to the prophet's own day, partial fulfilment in successive generations, Gospel fulfilment in the coming of Jesus and the final fulfilment at the end of history. The total fulfilment of Zechariah's words about peace to the ends of the earth will not be seen until the King Jesus comes again in His perfect Kingdom. But the promise remains sure, however long we may feel it is delayed in its fulfilment. And, as we wait, we have all the comfort and encouragement of the promises in the first eight chapters of Zechariah.

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9:9-13

We have been told of God-created peace through the coming King (9-10) and in v. 11 we are told of the blood of God's covenant. In the Old Testament the people of God would look back to the Passover Lamb (Exod. 12:1-7, 12-13) whose shed blood gave them both safety in the night of judgment and deliverance from captivity. This was God's provision for the salvation of His people. In the New Testament we have the blood of the New Covenant spoken of in the Upper Room (Matt. 26:28) and in references such as Col. 1:20 where we are told that peace was made through the blood of the Cross, and in Heb. 9:11-14 where we are told that the blood of the atoning sacrifice secured eternal redemption. Now note in today's verses that God declares that He will use His own redeemed and restored people as His instruments in the outworking of all He has planned to do. It is on God's faithful covenant that we depend, and in that sure covenant we ground our hope. Think of the Communion hymn:

"My blood I thus pour forth," He cries,
To cleanse the soul in sin that lies;
In this the covenant is sealed,
And Heaven's eternal grace revealed." (Scottish Paraphrases)

The salvation we have is guaranteed personally by God Himself and it is because of this we are called "prisoners of hope" (12). We have forgiveness and deliverance but still we live in this broken world which is described here as a waterless pit. There is a "not yet" element in the life of the believer. We rejoice in hope because it is sure and guaranteed (Rom. 5:1-2) and this hope is our anchor (Heb. 6:19). We are saved in hope (Rom. 8:24) and that hope is laid up for us (Col. 1:5). Because we are believers we are obliged to live in hope. We are prisoners of hope, and that is a blessed prison to be in. Take a Concordance and look up the references in the New Testament to "hope".

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9:14-17

The prophet now declares that the Lord in person will appear over His people to sound His trumpet and to lead them in His victory procession. Three times (14, 15, 16) there is a declaration of what the Lord will do for and

be to His people and we do well to revel in the assurances that are given. It is quite a thought that the unseen, eternal God appears and is made manifest on behalf of His people and, of course, this is what happened in the coming of Jesus. Read 1 Tim. 3:16 and 1 Pet. 1: 18-21. Read also, for example, Psalm 29 and 2 Samuel 22:1-20. This is the God we have and this is the glorious personal way He acts on our behalf. Paul may have been thinking of v.14 when he penned 2 Cor. 2:14. God does indeed give us the victory (1 Cor. 15:57) and we need to believe that the victory is ours *now* (1 John 5:4-5). The Lord will also protect His people. If we read v.15 –16 we lose some of the grimness and are shown rather a very substantial banquet of rejoicing. In v.16 the Lord is the Shepherd of His people and that speaks of care and leading to green pastures and waters of rest (Ps. 23). How we need to learn of the gentleness of our God (Isa. 40:11)! Now let your heart thrill to the statement that you are precious to God, valued like precious jewels that adorn His crown. What a value the Lord sets on His people! Why should we ever be cast down with a God of salvation like that? (Ps. 43:3-5). But look at the last statement of v.16. The Lord's people shine and give light and pleasure to His land. Jesus said “*You are* the light of the world.” Please God, our light will never grow dim, and our lives will be such that they will send out the light rather than cloud it.

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10:1-5

The first verse really belongs to the end of the previous chapter and is linked to the theme of the sure hope of God's people. There is blessing to look forward to and, although it is essentially spiritual blessing, it is spoken of in material terms. If then the grain in abundance is to be realised (9:17), there needs to be rain, the early rain that breaks up the soil ready for the reception of the seed and then the latter rain that leads to the ripening of the crops. The people are told to ask for the rain, and that means they are being urged to pray, not just to assume that all will be well. One of the things prayer does is to make us and keep us conscious of our total dependence on God. When we hear the promises of God that indicate His purpose to bless, that is the time to pray. When there are signs around us of God beginning to work, that is the time to pray. But in those seasons when there seems to be no indication of God's presence or God's activity, and the heavens seem as brass and our hearts seem as heavy as lead, that too is the time to pray. What is more, we need to learn not to stop praying too soon. Think of the story in 1 Kings 18:41-45 and see the need for persistence in prayer, persisting in faith but not presumption. Read also 2 Kings 13:14-19 and see the danger of having too low and limited expectations. This would have been a danger to the people in Zechariah's time because of their demoralisation and difficulties. It is all too easy to settle for just the resolution of the immediate situation rather than press on to consolidate advances and lay the foundation for the future. When God purposes to bless, it is vital that His people are made ready to cope with the demands *and* the benefits of His blessing. Many a believer has grown spiritually when in difficulties and then when life got easier has lapsed into second rate spiritual life and service.

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10:1-5

One great danger to the future development of God's work is the presence of false teachers who lead the people of God into a sham spirituality. Of course, the Devil is in this, and it is not surprising that he seeks to sidetrack the work. The evil one accomplishes this by seducing believers away to false doctrine; by beguiling believers with false ideas about the Holy Spirit; and by causing believers to think about Christian life and service in ways that accord more with the spirit of the world than with the Word and Spirit of God (Rom. 12:1-2). There is so much in Scripture about false teachers and deceiving spirits that we give only three references. We have Jesus' warning in Matt. 24:24; Paul's warning in 1 Tim. 4:1 and John's serious instruction to put the spirits to the test and not to accept everything that seems spiritual to be from God (1 John 4:1). It is quite startling in v.2 to find sudden reference to fortune-tellers and those who dabble in the occult, and it is a reminder that when such things proliferate it is a sign that the state of the nation is perilously adrift from God. But there is indication that some (perhaps many) of God's believing people are inveigled into this trifling with the supernatural and as a result are wandering and afflicted like lost sheep. This is indeed a warning for our own generation for there is a virtual plague of self-appointed leaders and multiplicity of organisations all claiming to be the ones to lead to

fullness of life and blessing (but not saying too much about sacrificial, long-term service). Think well before you turn away from trusted spiritual leaders who, often at great cost to themselves, have led you safely thus far. (Phil. 3:17-18; 1 Cor. 4:14-16).

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10:1-5

We cannot leave these verses without noting carefully and seriously the responsibility the shepherds carry for the distress of the flock. Whatever our particular shepherding, and it speaks particularly about ministers, God expects us to be faithful and trustworthy, and to be prepared to sacrifice ourselves for the sheep as good shepherds should (John 10:11). God's anger with false and faithless shepherds is declared clearly and plainly in Ezek. 34:1-16, and His attitude is explained and justified because of His care for the flock. God's people are precious in His sight and because He loves them with an everlasting love He desires and plans the best for them. Now note carefully all that God is going to do for, and to make, His people. The metaphors pile up. It is no longer sheep, but an admirable war-horse eager to go forward. "Those who in their submission to the Lord are like sheep become invincible as war-horses in His service." (Baldwin) What a reassurance to Christians of timid personality? God has indeed chosen the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:26-29) and He reminds us of the possibilities of our lives because of the Spirit He has given us (2 Tim. 1:6-7). "Think what Spirit dwells within you" (H F Lyte). The Lord's sheep do not bleat in face of the battle but rather raise their heads in anticipation (Ps. 3:3). There is a whole series of studies in v.4 concerning the One who is to come, and all the illustrations speak of strength, stability and sureness. They were spoken of by the earlier prophets. Read Isa. 22:22 and think of Jesus, not just as an earthly ruler. Read Isa. 28:16 which Paul refers to in Rom. 9:33; 10:11; and Peter in 1 Pet. 2:6-7. The battle-bow seems to refer back to 2 Kings 13:17. Victory is secure. That is the believers' song.

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10:6-12

It is important to read through this passage without lingering with the details in order to note and to thrill to the number of times God says, "I will." It is little wonder that at the end we are told that the people will glory in the name of their God (RSV), walk (NIV), or march proudly (NEB) in His name. The last phrase in v.12 is translated in NEB as, "This is the word of the Lord." God has spoken, and what He says, He will do. Zechariah's words may well have applied first to those Jewish exiles still in foreign lands who were yet to be brought back to their homeland, but the message is even greater. It speaks first to those who have failed and who know they have failed, and then it speaks of the future which, in the purpose of God, will be greater, fuller and richer than the past has been. It is important to realise that Zechariah's generation was very aware that they and their fathers before them had failed and fallen away from God, and a sense of failure, together with the feeling of guilt it brings, can be a powerful hindrance to keep believing people from going on positively into the future. Memory of past failure can demoralise and crush and steal away every blessing from life. But there is a God who forgives and restores, and this is the message in v.6. There is to be a new lease of life, and energy and it will be God's doing. God will do this because of His love for His people. He does not stop loving simply because they had failed. Such is His grace that the relationship between them and their God will be as though they had never sinned or been under discipline. This is true restoration (Joel 2:25 AV). The past, with all its marks, scars, hurts and memories will be totally forgotten. It seems too good to be true but God says this is what He will do.

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10:6-12

We dealt yesterday with God's determined purpose to restore and bless His people and our hearts should rejoice in this. But we must note at the end of v.6 the reference to God answering His people. This means they must have been crying to their God in prayer, and this turning to God in prayer is one of the significant blessings of affliction. In the early history of the Israelites when they were in Egypt, it was only when life became hard that they remembered their divine calling and began to cry to God in prayer (Ex. 2:23-25). Previously they had been comfortable there and had enjoyed the "spicy" pleasures of Egypt (Num. 11:4-6) and as a result had forgotten

their spiritual calling. The same kind of thing can happen today, not just because people are often very comfortable materially, but also because they can become complacent and indulgent because of the sheer abundance of spiritual provision. Sometimes it is only when we are taken away from all our living and lively worship, ministry, prayer meetings (if we go to them) and fellowship that we realise how favoured we had been and how shallow and reluctant our response to God has been. We tend to forget the sadness of the heart of God when we lapse into indifference. Think of the poignancy of God's complaint in Isa. 1:1-3 and compare that with the eagerness of God's heart in today's verses. He is bringing His people home (10). He is the God who watched over them in all the years of their shame, but now that discipline has worked repentance (and that can take a long time) He is bringing them back. Read Hebrews 12:5-11. Ponder well and evaluate wisely God's dealings with us at this very stage in our experience. What is He saying? Are we hearing? Are we listening?

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10:6-12

Read along with this passage the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-24. When we read that the son came to his senses we need to consider how this came about. !t was not just a natural reaction to miserable circumstances but an answer to the prayers of his father, and we must see in the development of the story the work of God's Spirit who deals with us all to bring us to our senses. In the passage in Zechariah we have already emphasised the activity of God. He was bringing His people home. In v.8 "I will signal" could more vividly be translated, "I will whistle" and we see the great Shepherd doing what He knew the sheep would understand. In v.9 God says He was the One who scattered them but He never lost sight of them and He is sure they would recognise His voice as His Spirit and Word awakened long lost memories. What an encouragement this is to pray for those who show no interest in spiritual things but who may have had godly grandparents or Sunday School teachers in their childhood and youth. In v.9 the word "scatter" could be translated "sow" and this gives the sense of a long process coming to harvest and gathering. In v.10-11 the references to Egypt and to passing through the sea would remind the people of the great act of God at the time of the Exodus, when they were in a glorious way saved from sin and bondage and led by God into a new life of liberty, abundance and blessing. In v.12 we are reluctant to lose the word "glory" (RSV), because with a God like this we should rejoice. But it should read "they will walk in His name" not just "walking in the light" (1 John 1:5-7) but walking in fellowship, obedience, love and gratitude. Read the story of the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-15. We started today with the Prodigal and his story is well summarised: Sick of home; Home-sick; Home!

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11:1-3

These verses seem impossible to understand. The previous passage (10:6-12) was vibrant with blessing, progress and rejoicing. Before that (10:3-5) there were stern words about unfaithful shepherds. Now we seem to be reading of confusion and catastrophe. Lebanon, referred to in 10:10 in terms of blessing, now seems to be under rebuke. The whole of the section from 9:1-11:3 is presented in the form of a poem and today's verses may be taken in something of a symbolic way. But what do they refer to? The reference may be to alien kings, who had despoiled the Jews and now come to their judgment (Jer. 25:34-37). The reference may also be to developments in the generations following the return from captivity when once again, as they had done in the past, the leaders of the Jews backslid and proved spiritually unfaithful, leading the people into folly and disobedience and, consequently, into God's rebuke. The prophet may even be "seeing" far ahead to the time after our Lord's life and death, when Jerusalem in AD 70 was reduced to ruins by the Romans. God's people are not always aware of what God is doing because they can be so preoccupied with their own affairs and their own blessing. Jesus wept because the people did not recognise the time of their visitation (Lk. 19:41-44). In Zechariah, the revival and restoration (10:6-12) may have proved to be revival without true repentance and that is ominous. On the other hand the lesson may be that revival and progress will not ever be without opposition, and the picture of the forests being cut down and the lions driven from cover and being enraged may serve to make us think of the roaring lion we are warned about the New Testament (1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 12:12).

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11:4-6

Look forward to v.12 and the reference to “thirty pieces of silver” as the “price” of the Shepherd (Matt. 26:14-15). Remember that the prophet spoke first to his own generation and the immediate future, but his words have a much more long-term significance. Zechariah is made the shepherd of the flock and this is God’s doing. A leader and carer was thus appointed and we will see what happens to him. “It is often assumed that if a country were to find a ruler totally dedicated to the good of his people, who would rid the land of injustice and encourage all that makes for harmony, peace and justice would prevail. One insight of this prophet is that such a ruler would not only not be welcomed, but he would be positively hated and rejected ... The flock in question is undoubtedly Israel, and the shepherd belongs to Israel... There are three clear divisions: The Lord gives one last chance (4-6). The good shepherd is rejected (7-14). A worthless shepherd replaces him (15-17)” (Baldwin). Speaking in this way we see that God’s plan of salvation is one plan from beginning to end, encompassing the whole of history. The promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament in the coming of Christ, but the promise remains, for now we still look to the Return of Christ in glory. This means we must see in the prophecies of the Old Testament not just an immediate application, but successive applications, ever increasing, but all understood in terms of the coming of Christ, and His glorious death and resurrection for the salvation of His people. But when Christ came to His own people they refused Him (John 1:11). If then we are reading of “one last chance”, how solemn it is if that chance is refused! As the New Testament says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” (Heb. 2:3).

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11:7-14

The prophet takes up his role as shepherd as instructed in v.4 and seems to act out the message in dramatic form. It is clear from the outset that the shepherd’s efforts are to end in failure. What we have here is a parable showing how the people of Israel were rejected because they rejected their King and rejected the covenant which made them God’s people. In spite of the immense difficulties in interpreting these verses we must make it our business to grasp spiritual lessons. This comment by one great expositor helps to focus the message. “The principles which underlie this allegory are obvious. God’s sheep, persecuted and helpless though they be, are yet obstinate, and their obstinacy not only renders God’s good will to them futile, but causes the death of the man who would have done them good. The guilty sacrifice the innocent, but in this execute their doom. That is a summary of Israel’s history.” We see in the Jews’ rejection of Jesus a picture of what they had done all down their history, always refusing and rejecting God’s gracious and saving words through the prophets (2 Chron. 36:15,16) and always resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51,52). The two staffs, Grace (Favour) and Union, symbolise the nature and principles of the Shepherd’s ministry and leadership. It is clear from v.10 that one staff indicated the covenant God had made with His people. In v.14 we see that the other staff symbolised the brotherhood or fellowship which was the nature of the relationship between God and His people. The breaking of an engagement made in sweetness of devoted love is a painful tragedy. Think of the loving heart of God, Father and Son, as the words, “Away with Him, Crucify Him, we have no king but Caesar! (John 19:15)” were shouted with such bitterness. The deeper the love, the deeper the wound.

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11:7-14

The thought of God breaking off His commitment to His people is a terrible one and it highlights the danger and the cost of disobedience and spiritual unfaithfulness. But do not forget that we must see further than the immediate situation of the prophet. Think of how Paul speaks of the casting off of Israel; how a remnant of faith remained; and how, in and through the rejection of Israel, salvation came to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:1-6, 11-12, 17-24). In today’s passage v.8, according to the commentaries, has been given upwards of forty interpretations and it is not for us to add to the number. F.B. Meyer suggests the three deposed (not destroyed) shepherds represent prophet, priest and king, all of whom had failed radically to do the tasks God had given them. It is only a suggestion, but it makes us think of the One to come who would in a perfect way be Prophet, Priest and

King, Jesus Himself. There is no suggestion that Zechariah was a failure. He was the man speaking God's truth with unquestioning obedience. In a brief spell of time the unworthy leaders were removed. When God's longsuffering runs out He has no difficulty in removing those who detest and reject His true Leader. Men and women should never think that they are powerful or permanent. Power belongs to God alone and He will bear with resistance to grace and goodness only so long. We have another solemn statement in v.9. God's shepherd withdraws His leadership and with it His protection and the rebellious sheep are left to their own devices. This is where we end up when we refuse to be corrected by God's gracious Word. Take heed that you are not departing from God (Heb. 3:12). If you insist on your own way, God will let you have it. But you will not have God with you any more.

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11:7-14

One last study in these solemn and difficult verses will lead us sadly and yet with comfort and hope to our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Granted we think of Him by way of the story of Judas who, for thirty pieces of silver, sold, betrayed and delivered up the Son of God to the death of the Cross. The godless merchants here are eager to get rid of the shepherd and they see in his rejection by the flock the word and action of God (11). There may be a suggestion that the godless could see that a people, false to their God and their profession, were being rejected. Do not press the details of the "pay-off" too far. What we have is a picture. The thirty shekels (RSV) was the price for the death of a slave (Exod. 21:32). The NIV speaks of thirty pieces of silver, "the handsome price" at which they valued the shepherd, and goes on to speak of the money being thrown to the potter, not into the treasury. Read it again in the Gospel account of Judas and the High Priests and note that the hearts of the priests were harder than Judas' heart. They had no remorse at all (Matt. 27:3-10). The last verses of the allegory of the shepherd tell of how, after his rejection, the people are left to fall under the tyranny of a heartless, uncaring shepherd. When Christ is rejected then Anti-christ takes His place. We see this all over the world. The State or the System becomes all that matters. People count for nothing. Everything becomes dehumanised. "Responsibility for human chaos lies squarely on human shoulders. God has offered men His shepherd, but they have rejected him to their own irreparable loss." (Baldwin) "Come, let us to the Lord our God, with contrite hearts return."

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12:1

Concentrate on this description of the God who is to carry out the solemn judgments about to be spoken of. The chapter is headed "An Oracle" and the solemnity and importance are to be emphasised in what seems to be a second title, "The word of the Lord concerning ..." . Then when the prophet begins his message he says, "Thus says the Lord." All in all it seems that Zechariah was aware that the message he had to bring would be a heavy burden to speak and to hear. Perhaps only those who have to preach a solemn word of judgment can really understand the prophet's tone of voice. Zechariah knew he spoke in the name of the Lord and he described in remarkably few words the totality of divine sovereignty. This is an aspect of the doctrine of God that we tend to forget and it is not in any sense a contradiction of God's tenderness, love and care. The thought of the sovereignty of God should bring to His people a sense of both security and comfort. If, for our salvation and destiny, we are held in the hand of this God, then we can be at peace no matter how circumstances may roar around us (Ps. 27:1-6). The statement, "Your God is too small" is often a deserved rebuke. Let scripture set our thinking straight by reading Isaiah 40:12-14, 18, 21-23, 25-26, 27-31; 42:5-9; 43:10-13, 25; 45:1-6; Rom. 11:33-36. This is our God, and along with His power we must remember His wisdom, His longsuffering, His redeeming love, and the perfection of all His methods and timing. He is in every sense a God to be worshipped, trusted and adored.

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12:2-9

The picture seems to be one of all the nations of the world in confederation gathered against Jerusalem , and God intervening to confound and defeat the enemy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to apply these pictorial events to a specific point of history and in such apocalyptic and prophetic passages we must always look right through to the end of history when God's purposes are brought to final, victorious conclusion. Never forget that right through the Bible we are told that the "world" will persecute the "church" and the conflict will go on until the end of time. But the gates of Hell shall not prevail (Matt. 16:18). That is God's affirmation. Here, the combined nations find they have taken on far more than they are able to perform. Jerusalem proves to be a cup of reeling and confusion, sending the enemy staggering. They did not expect this when they "took up the cup" in their evil confidence. Pause to think of God's cup of blessing for His people (Ps. 116:13; Ps. 23:5; 1 Cor. 10:16). In our passage (v.2) it seems that Judah in some way, either willingly or by compulsion, has been drawn into opposing Jerusalem. That is a frightening thought, that anyone claiming to belong to God should be fighting against God (Acts 5:39). We must be careful about our involvements! Jerusalem is then spoken of as a heavy stone and the nations trying to move it not only find it impossible, they harm themselves in the effort. The picture then becomes one of a cavalry charge (4) which the Lord confounds. It is quite exciting to have a God who intervenes like this. And it is wonderful to see that He opens His eyes on the compromised people of Judah and draws them back to Himself. Difficult as these verses are they speak to the heart.

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12:2-9

Note that there is something immediate about God's intentions (2) and the recurring phrase "on that day" signifies something quite specific. We spoke yesterday of the Lord opening His eyes on Judah, seeing His people who had wandered grievously, and bringing them back. It is the picture of the Shepherd who is not content with the ninety-nine but searches for the one who is lost (Matt. 18:12,13). Judah recognised that God was with His people and that was where Judah now wanted to be. What a thrill it is to us and to God when a backslider wants to return. But there was more than just return for Judah. In the providence of God Judah was to become an instrument of fire and judgment in the midst of the evil persecutors. There is power for service as well as sweetness of blessing in a new consecration. In v.7-8 we are told that spiritual rivalry between the house of David in Jerusalem and the rest of Judah would be brought to an end by a recognition that the victory is given by God and not won by themselves and that every one of them, even the feeblest, had an honourable place. What a reassurance it is to be reminded of God's shield protecting His people and His work. It reminds us of the protecting wall of fire in the opening chapters of Zechariah. The reference to the feeblest being made like David may be a reference back to the story of how the young, undervalued David became the conqueror of Goliath by the strength of the Lord (1 Sam. 17:45-49). However confused we may still be as to the various interpretations and applications to history of these difficult prophecies, we can still learn spiritual lessons from them. One lesson is the danger of a party spirit within the church which leads, by comparisons, to spiritual pride (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

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12:2-9

Let today's study be a meditation on how this prophecy must have encouraged the people of God in the time of Zechariah as they battled against odds to carry forward the work of God entrusted to them. Some may sing in church the hymn, "Join all the glorious names," which has in it the astonishing affirmation that, "a feeble saint shall win the day, though death and hell obstruct the way." Do we believe that and think of it when we are up against it and are more aware of weakness and limitation than of strength? But does not the Bible say that God chooses the weak of the world to do His mighty deeds (1 Cor. 1:26-29)? Did not Paul present the paradox that when we are weak *then we are strong*? He did not say we will *become* strong (2 Cor 12:9, 10). What we are reading of in v.8 is a promise of miraculous strengthening and enabling given by God so that His work will be done. The language is quite astonishing. The feeblest will be mighty as David in his best days and the "house"

of David (can that refer to the "church" or the "work") will be God-like. Does that seem excessive? But does not God dwell in the midst of His people so that He is the glory of them and their work (2:5)? Is it not true that the Spirit of God indwells the believer and that Christ in us is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27)? Are we not, in Christ, called to His eternal glory (1 Pet. 5:10)? Is it not stated clearly that it does not yet appear what we shall be but we shall be like Him (1 John 3:1-3)? It is best that we should not be over-conscious of such glorious facts, but neither must we forget them. Now, set all that against the last verse which speaks of world conflict among the nations and final victory for Jerusalem, whatever Jerusalem may stand for.

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12:10-11

Note very carefully that the total rout of all their enemies did not result in a carnal spirit of victory, vengeance or rejoicing, but in a spirit of repentance and a godly sorrow for sin (2 Cor. 7:9,10). There is no sign of spiritual presumption or complacency but rather a great sense of unworthiness and of sorrow over the sins that had pierced the loving heart of God. It is when we find ourselves face to face with what God has done for us, how He has loved us, and at what cost He has won the victory for us over sin, that we begin to sense the necessity for heart-repentance and for pouring contempt on all our pride. Ponder all the words of that amazing hymn, "When I survey the wondrous Cross, on which the Prince of Glory died." That was the price paid and that was the love given while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). Think of how life would have been and what we would have been if God had not intervened to redeem and deliver us. When we ponder these things we begin to see that the goodness of God does indeed lead to repentance (Rom. 2:4). The spirit of compassion (grace) and supplication indicates a tenderness of heart towards God, and towards Him who was pierced, and towards other sinners. How can forgiven sinners be hard and harsh and unforgiving towards others? Note how this great sorrow for sin was brought to the forefront of the people's minds and hearts as they looked on the Shepherd, sold in the last chapter for thirty pieces of silver. That this should fix our thoughts on Jesus is clear from John 19:31-37. But we must not forget that a true sorrow for sin and failure will be evidenced by a turning away from sin and a turning back to God. Mere sorrow for sin and an endless confession of it can be a carnal indulgence and a substitute for change.

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12:10-14

These verses speak of the depth of this mourning for sin and the deep loneliness of it. People will be by themselves with no-one to share the desolation. It is the kind of sorrow that is painfully aware that what has happened cannot be undone because it is now too late. There is a significant reference to mourning because of the pierced one (Rev. 1:4-7). When Christ comes in His glory at the end of time many, not least the Jews, will see with pitiful mourning the One whom they have refused, rejected and pierced. All will see then the terrible folly of refusing the Saviour who came to them, but it will be too late to change, for the day of grace will have given way to the Day of Judgment. In v.10 some versions read, "look on me," and some read, "look on him, the one they have pierced." It is God who is speaking; we have been thinking of the Son our Saviour, but we cannot separate the Father and Son in the work of salvation. Scripture makes it plain that Christ, by the Eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God (Heb. 9:14). Wesley states it in stark terms, "Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me?" Some suggest that the historical reference in v.11 is to the intense national mourning on the death of good king Josiah in 2 Chron. 35:20-25, a tragedy that seemed to lead right on to the collapse of Jerusalem and the captivity in Babylon. If this be so, and we cannot be at all sure, then the mourning is for something that need never have happened if only the people had listened to God when He spoke to them. Let God speak to our lives, and if there are things that are wrong, set them right while the opportunity is there. Every time we harden our hearts it gets more difficult to repent.

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13:1

The previous chapter spoke of a new spirit of prayer and penitence, with a new sense of wrong and a new desire to be right with God and back in fellowship with Him. This is something that has to operate on a personal, one-by-one basis. It is not the kind of false repentance that is merely a surge of emotion and tears. Ponder well 2 Cor. 7:8-11. It is the work of God's Spirit to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment to come (John 16:7-11). But that does not end the work of the Spirit, for He leads us as convicted sinners to where we can be washed clean: the fountain at the place called Calvary. The great hymns of the church say it all so well.

"There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains." (Cowper)

"Convince us of our sin;
Then lead to Jesus' blood,
And to our wondering view reveal
The secret love of God.

"'Tis Thine to cleanse the heart,
To sanctify the soul,
To pour fresh life on every part,
And new create the whole." (Hart)

"Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power."
(Toplady)

Read the same in Scripture. 1 John 1:7-9; Rev. 1:4-6; 7: 13-17; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Cor. 6:9-11. It is indeed good news for sinners to be told, "Wash and be clean." (2 Kings 5: 11-14). In many ways the Gospel is very simple.

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13:2-6

The theme is still the glorious forgiveness of God so that the most terrible of sins, even those against the Good Shepherd who was "paid off" and rejected, can be washed away totally. We have seen this instant cleansing as an act of God Himself in the story of Joshua in Zech. 3:4-5. Zechariah himself would no doubt have known the marvellous promise from God during the time of captivity in Babylon and recorded in Ezek. 36:24-29. Later in his prophecy Ezekiel spoke of a river of cleansing and revival purging the whole land (Ezek. 47) and Zechariah was soon to speak of flowing waters that will cleanse the whole world. When we go to Revelation 22:1-5 we are told of the river of life flowing from the throne of God, and of a time when there will be no more any sin, evil or wrong to mar the new creation of God. How we need to thrill to the vastness of all that is meant by forgiveness. We must never lose our forward look, especially when our own sins and those of others seem to fill the horizon and when it seems that human badness rather than God's goodness directs and controls the affairs of men and nations. One thing we must be quite clear about is that sin and Satan have neither future nor permanence. They are finished. That is what Jesus cried in triumph on the Cross. But never let us forget the cost. In today's passage (v.6) especially if we read "hands" instead of "body", we will think of the Saviour, remembering of course that He was whipped and scourged before He was nailed to the Cross.

"We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains He had to bear;
But we believe it was for us

He hung and suffered there"
(Alexander)

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13:2-6

We have spoken of the glory of God's forgiveness and we must note now the thoroughness of His working. We are told in these verses that true revival and quickening by the Spirit will be accompanied by moral reformation both individual and national. There will also be the unmasking of evil, especially when that evil is in the religious disguise of false prophets. Anything and everything that has contributed to the sin and backsliding of the nation will be dealt with by God. The names of the idols will be cut off, and "things" and "systems" will be shown to be not innocent but inspired and motivated by a spirit of evil (1 Cor. 8:4-6; 10:14-22). We need to be more careful when we are challenged about our activities and associations before we say, "There is no harm in it." If it is in any way coming between us and God or hindering our spiritual growth and commitment then it is wrong! We are not told exactly how God will cut off the evil but there is a suggestion in v.3 that when public opinion is biblically informed and inspired, then evil and false prophets in particular will not be tolerated. They will be seen to be contrary to God and contrary to the life of the nation. This is not a new message that Zechariah is propounding but one grounded in the law of God as Deut. 13:6-10 makes plain. Of course this calls for clear thinking and a recognition of the cancerous virus of sin, whether in the life of the individual or that of the nation. Sin works terrible devastation before it finally produces death (Jas. 1:13-15). Lies and falsehood, especially from the mouths of those who claim to be God's prophets, are likewise very dangerous and must be exposed. But note last of all in v.4-5 that the "professional" prophet, sensing the unpopularity of prophetic ministry, will want to contract out. Has this something to say to the church about lack of men training for the ministry? When God's flock is hungry for spiritual food they will not go to listen to those who have no real word from God.

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13:7-9

In this whole section of the prophecy the message seems to swing from sweetest encouragement to solemn discipline, rebuke and judgment. When the Lord of Hosts speaks of *my Shepherd* who stands *next me*, and when we remember that "The Word was with God" (John 1:1-4) we can do none other than think of our Saviour Jesus Christ who was indeed struck and smitten. Such thoughts are confirmed by the fact that Jesus quoted these very words of Zechariah as He drew near the time for His death on the Cross (Matt. 26:30-31). We must also remember the widespread judgment that fell on the Jewish nation after the time of the Cross when, by AD 70, Jerusalem lay in ruins, destroyed by the Roman powers. Then down through the ages of history the Jews have been scattered among the nations, and even now, though the State of Israel is established, the Jews are still scattered, some returning to their land and others leaving it. The prophet goes on to speak of a remnant which, being put through the fires of affliction, become a people surer than ever of their calling and their destiny. The last verse is wonderful. The objective in all God's dealings with His people is to win their hearts back to Himself so that with gladness, gratitude, and indeed with relief the people will call on their God. God testifies with equal gladness that these are His people. He is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16). Is it not a great and good thing when we want to be the kind of people God can be proud of? Keep in mind that all through these passages there is the thought of the good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

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14:1

We have another difficult chapter and we study it in general terms, trying to keep in focus what we have been learning. In the whole of chapters 9-14 there is repeated emphasis on a day of God's power, with the thought of God's intervention in the affairs of the world in the interest of His redeemed people. Particularly in chapters 13-14 we have the repeated phrase "on that day" which signifies not only deliberate action on God's part but specific plan and time-table. We have a similar indication of timing in Acts 17:31 and in Rev. 9:15. At the same

time in the picture we see God's representative rejected and killed, the seeming triumph of evil, and the capture and desolation of Jerusalem. Then the Lord appears to bring final judgment and to establish His worldwide kingdom. This is the climax of history and time gives way to eternity. Evil has done its worst but God is king. Remember that history is the story of a *fallen* world which will always be true to its fallen nature so that it will never produce a Utopia. But history is also the story of God's redemptive purpose which will always be in conflict with the spirit of the world. Read and consider the parable of the Tares and the Wheat in Matt. 13:24-30 and grasp clearly the thought of good and evil growing together until the harvest. The presence and operation of evil cannot and will not prevent in any way the full and final harvest of God's purposes. But we need also to read Rev. 12:7-12 to realise that evil will be at its most intense towards the end of history. In such a context we are taught in Eph. 6:10ff that the battle is a spiritual one, more far reaching than we can ever see at any given stage. But the issues are in God's hand; the victory is already won, and full provision is made for us in Christ.

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14:1-3

We do not attempt to consider all the various interpretations of the prophecies in this chapter nor do we limit the possibilities to what we can grasp and understand in our present limited capacity. Rather we must grasp the fact of the Day of the Lord and make ourselves ready for it. Without ignoring any literal reference to Jerusalem or to the significance of the Jews (Israel) in world history and in the plan of God (remember Romans 9-11) and without ignoring the fact of the State of Israel and the focusing of so much world history in the Middle East and in the relations of world powers to that area of the world, we take Jerusalem here to stand for and be a symbol of God's purposes of salvation. We are told then of a uniting of the nations against Jerusalem because she is the only remaining barrier to the establishing of a world empire of godlessness. Unbelief and the whole system of humanism which puts man in the place of God eventually becomes totalitarian. There comes a clear polarisation of godliness and godlessness. We are told that Jerusalem is taken and plundered, and that has happened literally again and again down history while today the great mosque of Islam is built on the very site of the Jewish Temple. It stands as a contradiction of all that is holy to the Jews and as a rebuke to their unfaithfulness to their God. Jerusalem, representing God in the world, is persecuted just as the church, representing God in the world, is persecuted by all that is in spirit and practice anti-Christ. Jesus told the disciples the world would hate and persecute them (John 15:18-21) and John makes plain that the spirit of the world is *against* God and *for* the Devil (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). But we must not be deceived or disheartened by what seems defeat, whether Jerusalem collapsing or the church declining, as it is in our nation at present. God knows what He is doing, and what He allows is in order to accomplish His will. Read it in Rev. 17:12-17 and never fear the collaboration of evil kingdoms.

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14:4-5

The picture is vivid and really very reassuring even though we do not understand the details. In the plundering of Jerusalem the nations of evil are drawn together to the place of their judgment and what they had thought was clear and final victory recoils on them. We are told (3) that the Lord goes out to fight, as He did in Exodus 14:13-14, and He does so in terrible majesty. Some people react against such a picture but if we consider the terrible ravages of evil and the desolations they have brought to suffering mankind we cannot object to righteous judgment. In any case, since we know the character of God, when we are faced with the baffling situations of life we can say, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25) For many people God seems only a feeble spectator of world affairs, but for the believer, taught in Scripture, God is the one who takes action and intervenes, though all too often we fail to discern His ways. Now we are told that on that day His feet shall stand on the heights of the Mount of Olives and, that mount being higher than the Temple mount, He can survey the whole scene as a commander of an army would view the battlefield. If we compare Acts 1:11-12 we are made to think of a literal fulfilment of this prophecy in a way that will cause every eye to see Him (Rev. 1:7). Was Jesus thinking of the Mount of Olives when He spoke of it being removed (Mk. 11:23)? Has the

prophet Isaiah something to say about this happening and the reaction of God's people to it (Isa. 25:6-9)? We seem to be asking questions rather than giving answers, but think on these things.

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14:4-5

We are told here (4) of a significant earth movement creating a rift valley through the Mount of Olives, apparently something like the Great Glen from Inverness to Fort William, and later we are told of other compensatory earth movements (10). When we think of what geologists tell us of this kind of thing in past ages of the world's history we must not write it off as impossible. The fabric of the earth is not nearly as stable as we sometimes think. The various modern translations of v.5 seem to contradict each other but the picture seems to be the opening up of a way of escape from Jerusalem to the east and we must recall Jesus' counsel to flee to the mountains when all the upheavals begin (Matt. 24:16; Lk. 21:20-22). The earth movements seem to fill up the Kidron valley so that the way is level for the people to make their escape. Just what all this means in spiritual terms is hard to say but the verse goes on to speak of God Himself arriving on the scene accompanied by all His holy ones. The prophet does not seem unduly disturbed, and certainly not panicked by the upheavals of creation and the surging of armies and refugees. His eyes are open and he sees what is usually unseen. He sees what another prophet's servant was given to see when he was unsettled by the seeming strength of evil. He was allowed to see the chariots of God (2 Kings 6:15-17). Do we not have a hymn that speaks of, "Ye armies of the living God, His sacramental host," and does not Heb. 1:14 speak of ministering spirits, angelic beings, sent forth from the presence of God to serve the heirs of salvation? The picture Zechariah gives seems to be that of the arrival of a great triumphal procession and he cheers heartily because His God has come.

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14:6-11

It is wonderful to see how this great day of the Lord is described in terms of light and life, a day that is altogether desirable. It is not surprising that the day is described in terms of cosmic changes because after all, the New Testament speaks of the whole order of creation groaning in the travail of its brokenness waiting for its final deliverance (Rom. 8:19-23). There are various translations of v.6 and NIV begins with "no light", although the next verse speaks of unique or continuous day. RSV has in brackets "it is known to the Lord," and that is a comfort, because we do not now know all the aspects and mysteries of creation nor can we know exactly the form and development of things that are to come. We are in the realm of astonishing cosmic changes that will no doubt awe us all, just as we felt a strange sense of wonder when we first saw pictures of men walking on the moon. A great many of the older generation were somewhat sceptical because they thought such a thing could never be. The absence of what we know as day and night with sun and moon may be linked with Rev. 22:5, where we are told that God, who is light (1 John 1:5), is all that is needed for the blessing and satisfaction of our hearts in a way that will never be qualified or ended. In v.8 Jerusalem, which had so often been short of water, is now told of rivers of water, independent of the changing seasons. It needs little imagination to visualise the transformation of the whole land in terms of rich fertility instead of dusty plains. It is a picture of the abundance of life that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10). Perhaps our Lord had this passage in Zechariah in mind when He spoke the words of John 7:37-39.

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14:6-11

The Lord is King (9). We sing these words, as the Old Testament saints sang them, by faith and in expectation. Read Psalm 93, which we love to sing in the metrical version to lead our hearts and minds in worship. At the start of Jesus' ministry He called people to repent and to believe, because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (Mk. 1:15). Now that Kingdom is a visible reality and every knee shall indeed bow, willingly or otherwise (Phil. 2:9-11). There will be no competitive "gods" in that day, for God shall be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28). In v.10 the message seems to be that the mountains round about Jerusalem which had served as a defence against enemies will no longer be needed and they are levelled so that Jerusalem will stand out, high and lifted up. It will be a

symbol of the glory of God and the eternal stability of His kingdom. In the last verse we are told there shall be no more curse, because the blight of sin will have been removed forever. This message to Zechariah's own generation would have been a great encouragement and reassurance. There had been so many reverses in the work, so much reluctance on the part of the Jews to live in Jerusalem and commit themselves to the work. Now they were told of a city teeming with glad-hearted people, living and working in security, and with an awareness of the Lord Himself ruling over them. We too must be encouraged. And we must look further forward than our own generation and the next, to the reality of the things unseen *as yet*, but gloriously real and true. Heaven is not escape, nor a poor substitute for real life here. Heaven is the reality, and even in the darkest days we need to remember that we are travelling toward sunrise.

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14:12-15

The Lord becoming King and establishing His everlasting kingdom, with all the marvellous changes that brings, will not be welcomed by all. The language here is vivid and grim and may be drawn from the experience of some terrible epidemic that struck an army. We have seen in our own day the ravages of famines, which famines have often been the direct result of wicked men and regimes seeking power no matter the cost to the population. We are seeing also the increasing ravages of epidemics which have been brought on society as a direct result of moral indulgence. Zechariah is also portraying here the evils of civil war and terrible panic as people seek to escape. The plague will affect even the animal kingdom and, while causes and explanations may be sought on the natural level, the fact is that all these things are happening as a direct result of the intervention of God in terms of judgment. No one finds it easy to talk about judgment and anyone who does so without a heavy, sad heart is not in accord with the gracious and loving heart of God. Yes, His wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. That is New Testament teaching (Rom. 1:18), but God's activity in judgment is spoken of in Isa. 28:21 as His strange work. Never forget that Jesus Himself spoke some of the most solemn words about judgment and Hell (Matt. 13:40-42; Mk. 9:42-48). God, being of purer eyes than to look on sin (Hab. 1:13) never conceals the fact that He is against all evil and will act in judgment against it. This is not punishment in terms of deterring others, nor in terms of correction of the evil doer, although punishment and discipline can do just that. But, where the heart is impenitent, does not want to change, and has no intention of changing, then punishment is retribution. It is carried out because it is deserved. This is a concept largely ignored and denied in our generation.

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14:16-21

We should compare this passage at the end of the prophecy with 8:18-23 which closed the first half of the book. From out of all the nations that experienced the rebuke and judgments of God there will be survivors who will now gladly come to worship the Lord. This is spoken of, naturally, in terms of keeping the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles in remembrance of the goodness of God who gives the harvest of the fields, who watched over His people in all their wanderings, bearing with them in their stupidity, grumbling and discontent, and who has worked everlasting salvation for them. This feast, as we see in Neh. 8:13-18 was also the occasion for hearing the Word of God and submitting to its teaching and blessing all over again. It seems strange that, after speaking of what seems to be final judgment, there is further reference to those who refuse to worship (17-19). We do not try to explain this, because we do not understand. Rather we note in v.17, 19 that there is an emphasis on worship and the consequences of neglecting worship. We can apply this to the lives of the people of God who have received such blessing and deliverance and security from their God. It is all too easy when we are spiritually "well fed" to become both complacent and careless, and our relationship to God, and to His faithful people, becomes superficial, self-centered, and God-forgetting. When that happens, in a way that we may not notice (but other people will notice), God's refreshing "rain" or blessing is withdrawn and our Christian lives grow dry and withered compared to what they once were in freshness and liveliness when we did walk with the Lord. This is a solemn and searching lesson for those who have left their first love (Rev. 2:4), but there is the promise that the desert of our lives can once again blossom as the rose (Isa. 35:1, 2 AV).

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14:16-21

We have the last two verses of the prophecy to consider. The picture is of the time when every part of the life of the people, including animals and even cooking pots will be in very truth holy unto the Lord. We are told in Exod. 28:36-38 that, right from the beginning of the story of Israel, the High Priest, who represented all the people, was to bear this mark, "Holy to the Lord." It speaks of being set apart for God's pleasure and service, and it calls all God's people to be holy as He is holy (1 Pet. 1:13-16). Again and again in the New Testament we are urged to be holy, to be partakers of His holiness, because without holiness we shall not see God (Heb. 12:10, 14). All may come to worship, but there will be no trader, or Canaanite allowed in the House of God. No one will be allowed to operate who would in any way spoil, distort, or use the House of God or the people of God for his own worldly and selfish ends. Think of the righteous anger of our Lord Jesus Christ when He cleansed the Temple of all that kept it from being His Father's true House and a place of prayer and blessing for the people (Mk. 11:15-17). Think finally of how heaven is spoken of in terms of glorious negatives - no more sin, hurt, sorrow, tears or death (Rev. 21:3,4; 22:3). And at the heart of it all is the Lamb on the Throne.

"There is a city bright;
Closed are its gates to sin;
Nought that defileth
Can ever enter in.

"Saviour, I come to Thee;
O Lamb of God, I pray,
Cleanse me and save me,
Wash all my sins away.

"Lord, make me, from this hour,
Thy loving child to be,
Kept by Thy power
From all that grieveth Thee."
(Deck)

"Holy to the Lord." Amen, so let it be.

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George Philip Bible Reading In Book