

*LONGING  
FOR GOD*

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*IN AN AGE OF*

*DISCOURAGEMENT*

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
THE OLD TESTAMENT



A series of studies on the lives  
of Old Testament characters, written for  
laypeople and pastors, and designed to  
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,  
and preaching of the Old Testament

TREMPER LONGMAN III

*Series Editor*

# LONGING FOR GOD

IN AN AGE OF

# DISCOURAGEMENT

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO

## ZECHARIAH

BRYAN R. GREGORY

The logo consists of the letters 'R' and 'R' in a stylized, serif font, with an ampersand (&) between them. The letters are bold and black.

P U B L I S H I N G

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For  
Christy, Joshua, and Noah



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## FOREWORD



*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

**C**oncerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them

what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

#### AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, certain themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III  
J. ALAN GROVES



## P R E F A C E



**T**hough at times neglected by the church, recently the book of Zechariah has been getting more attention. Many are rediscovering its rich theological contribution to the whole counsel of God, as well as its importance in understanding key parts of the New Testament such as the passion of Christ and the book of Revelation.

In preparing to study the book of Zechariah together, I should mention a few housekeeping items. First, all English translations of Zechariah are my own. Translations of other biblical texts are designated as either from the English Standard Version or the New International Version.

Second, I have generally tried to bring together three things in each chapter: an exposition of the text in its original historical context, reflection on how the text points us to the person and work of Christ, and suggestions of how the text refracted through Christ should shape the life of the church in the world. While texts can obviously provide many fruitful lanes of application, I have sought to develop in each chapter one particular avenue that seems to me to be a natural extension of the passage's principle theological trajectory. The avenues of application and New Testament connections that have been left unexplored will undoubtedly be worth the reader's time to trace on his or her own.

Finally, I am of the firm conviction that studying Scripture ought primarily to increase our love for God and for

one another. To that end, may we adopt humble hearts, teachable minds, and malleable wills as we seek to be transformed by our triune God through the reading of Zechariah. All glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forevermore. Amen.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



**I**n his *Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, Maximus the Confessor wrote, “Friends are abundant—that is, in times of prosperity. In time of trial you can barely find one.”<sup>1</sup> That is true both in life and in the normal ups and downs of writing a book. Three loved ones deserve special mention for their dedicated involvement in the project.

In extending thanks and appreciation, pride of place goes to my wonderful wife, Christy, for her love, encouragement, support, and thoughtful input. She, along with our two sons Joshua and Noah, made the months of writing all the more enjoyable.

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And, finally, a word of appreciation goes to the late Al Groves, a man who, in both his life and his death, caused so many—like Zechariah—to “lift up their eyes.”



# ABBREVIATIONS



AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
BST	Bible Speaks Today
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	<i>Continental Commentaries</i>
DSB	Daily Study Bible
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature Series
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
IBC	Interpretation Biblical Commentary
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism, Supplement Series
JSOTSS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
JSPSup	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha, Supplements
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NTM	New Testament Monographs

OTL	Old Testament Library
RB	<i>Révue Biblique</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
USQR	<i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum, Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

# PART ONE

AN AGE OF DISCOURAGEMENT





# I

## READING ZECHARIAH



All beginnings are hard. (Chaim Potok<sup>1</sup>)

### READING ZECHARIAH IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a book of new beginnings, Zechariah is filled with vivid images and enigmatic visions. Within its pages are some of the most memorable passages in all the Old Testament, passages that paint dramatic pictures and offer pointed oracles for a people who—like us—find themselves discouraged by the problems within their own community and the larger geopolitical instability of recent years. Yet understanding these passages can prove difficult without at least a basic grasp of the historical situation in which Zechariah ministered, namely the early Persian period.<sup>2</sup>

Historically speaking, the Persians came to dominate the Near East almost overnight under the leadership of Cyrus the Great. In just two decades (559–539 B.C.), Cyrus had risen to power, assimilated the Median Empire (550 B.C.), marched westward to defeat and acquire Lydia, Lycia, and the Greek states in Asia Minor, taken control of territory extending eastward to India, and conquered the powerful Babylonian Empire (539 B.C.). With the defeat

of Babylonia, the Persians inherited all the territory previously under Babylon's control, part of which was Judah. However, appropriating these newly acquired territories would require both an enormous administrative effort and a shrewd sense of diplomacy.

While Cyrus did not overhaul the bureaucratic structure he inherited from the Babylonians, he did implement one very strategic change to win the allegiance of the local populations. He enacted a policy of tolerance under which the conquered peoples were allowed to reconstruct their temples and sanctuaries and return to their traditional religious practices. The benefit to the Persians was twofold: the policy promoted Cyrus as a magnanimous ruler, and at the same time, it generated income for the empire through taxation. Evidence of this policy exists both in the pages of Scripture as well as in a cuneiform document commonly known as the Cyrus Cylinder. The book of Ezra begins as follows:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’” (Ezra 1:1–4 NIV)<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus describes his victory over Babylon and declares,

All the kings who sat in throne rooms, throughout the four quarters, from the Upper to the Lower Sea, those who dwelled in . . . all the kings of the west country who dwelled in tents, brought me their heavy tribute and kissed my feet in Babylon. From . . . to the cities of Ashur and Susa, Agade, Eshnunna, the cities of Zamban, Meternu, Der, as far as the region of the land of Gutium, the holy cities beyond the Tigris whose sanctuaries had been in ruins over a long period, the gods whose abode is in the midst of them, I returned to their places and housed them in lasting abodes. I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored to them their dwellings.<sup>4</sup>

In the specific case of the Jerusalem temple, Cyrus' motivations were undoubtedly more about political and military advantage than heartfelt generosity. The western front of the empire had become problematic and the repopulation and rebuilding of the area would have stabilized the region as well as shored up his resistance to Egypt. Nevertheless, as the Ezra text indicates, the Judeans saw Cyrus' edict (538 B.C.) not just as political maneuvering but also as God's sovereign fulfillment of prophecy and an expression of the Lord's intention to restore Israel. It was more than just an opportunity to return to their land from exile and to begin reconstruction of the temple; it was an indication that the long-awaited restoration was finally underway, and that the Lord was returning to Zion.

In response to the edict, exiles from the "houses of Judah and Benjamin" began returning to Jerusalem and its surrounding area to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:5–6 ESV). By Persian designation, this area formed the province of Yehud. The province itself was relatively small, roughly circumscribing the land around Jerusalem with a radius

of approximately seventeen miles (it included Jericho and Hazor to the north, Gezer to the west, and Beth-Zur and En-gedi to the south, with the Dead Sea and the Jordan River providing the eastern border).<sup>5</sup> In the early days, the population of the entire province might have been no more than fifty thousand people.<sup>6</sup>

To provide the exiles with leadership, Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar as the first governor of Yehud and charged him with rebuilding the temple and returning to it the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had removed and placed in his own temple in Babylon (Ezra 1:7–11; 5:14–15). The altar was rebuilt immediately so that the people could once again offer burnt offerings (Ezra 3:1–6). Shortly thereafter, preliminary work began on the foundations of the temple in 537 B.C. (Ezra 5:16).<sup>7</sup>

But the work quickly stalled, and over the next seventeen years little happened, due to both internal and external problems.<sup>8</sup> Internally, some argued against rebuilding the temple (Hag. 1:2).<sup>9</sup> It's possible that this resistance was fueled by economic difficulties stemming from high inflation from Persian taxation and the natural instability of an agriculturally dependent economy, which had recently suffered from a drought (Hag. 1:6, 9–11; 2:16). Moreover, with new homes needing to be built to accommodate the returning exiles, the rebuilding of the temple likely would have been a low priority for many (Hag. 1:4). In addition, tensions over property rights between those returning and those who never left probably exacerbated the housing problem further, resulting in considerable strain on the community.<sup>10</sup>

Externally, the Samaritan province to the north consistently troubled the Judeans as they tried to reestablish themselves. An appeal to their Persian overlords for help would have been fruitless since at that point “the Persian Empire under Cyrus had not established a sufficiently strong centralized government to allow for the high-level imposition of imperial will.”<sup>11</sup> Making matters worse,



many in exile were simply unwilling to leave their now prosperous lives in Babylon (and Egypt) to come back to Judah, which sparked shock and resentment among those who were trying to begin the process of reconstruction. Not surprisingly, this constellation of problems—social, economic, and political—produced cynicism and discouragement among the people. In sum, “all indications are, therefore, that life in Yehud was difficult. Its people lived daily with the painful contrast between the glories of the past and the humiliation of the present. Very little of what the returnees had eagerly expected had been realized.”<sup>12</sup>

However, winds of change were beginning to blow. During those seventeen years, a number of developments occurred in the Persian Empire. In 530 B.C., Cyrus was killed in battle and his son Cambyses, a widely disliked tyrant, assumed control of the empire. Like his father, he preoccupied himself with military expansion. Though he conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., he died only three years later. Succeeding him was Darius I, a usurper whose reign was to last thirty-six years (522–486 B.C.). When he took command, the empire was in turmoil. To combat this, Darius worked to consolidate the empire by suppressing numerous revolts and reforming its administrative system. He divided the empire into twenty regions called “satrapies,” and stationed a Persian official (or satrap) in each one to promote loyalty to the empire, administer the law, and manage effective taxation. Each satrapy was then divided into districts, or provinces, with recognized governors to see after local affairs.

In 520 B.C., Darius appointed Zerubbabel, a descendent of David, as the provincial governor of Yehud, a post he likely held for about ten years. During these years, reconstruction on the temple finally resumed under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua (Jeshua) and at the behest of the prophets Zechariah and Haggai (Ezra 3:8–11; Hag. 1:1, 14).

Even though temple building was in the best interest of the Persians who wanted to establish a solid provincial infrastructure, local challenges nevertheless surfaced. As the work of reconstruction progressed, adversaries within the province tried numerous strategies to thwart the efforts (Ezra 4:1–5). The conflicts attending the rebuilding seem to have prompted the Persians to send Tattenai, the governor of a neighboring province, along with some associates to Jerusalem to get to the bottom of it (Ezra 5:3–17). After sorting it all out, with Darius confirming Cyrus’ decree for the Jerusalem temple to be rebuilt, the construction was allowed to resume, though the builders continued to struggle with their task. At long last, however, the temple was completed “on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king,” that is in February of 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15 ESV).

The next sixty-five years were a tumultuous time, both in Yehud and in the larger Persian Empire. As Darius continued to try to extend his domain westward and northward, he was eventually resisted by Greek cities, which openly rebelled against Persia in 499 B.C. The conflict, known as the Greco-Persian wars, lasted for several decades. In 490 B.C., Darius suffered a devastating defeat to Athens at the Battle of Marathon. Four years later, Darius’ son Xerxes I assumed the throne and continued the struggle. Though he suffered numerous defeats, he did manage to hold on to several eastern territories.

As events unfolded, with Persian resources being channeled to the war with Greece, other nations within the Persian Empire, such as Egypt and Babylonia, began asserting their independence, with Babylonia apparently becoming a separate satrapy in 481 B.C. On the western front, several revolts by the Egyptians prompted the Persians to march through Yehud’s territory in order to deal with the uprisings, some of which occurred during Xerxes’ reign and some of which occurred under the reign of Xerxes’ son Artaxerxes I, who assumed the throne after his father was assassinated

in 464 B.C. Though the Egyptian revolts were defeated, not until the Peace of Callias (449 B.C.) did a temporary truce with Greece prevail.

These critical years (539–449 B.C.) provide the primary historical backdrop for understanding the visions and oracles in the book of Zechariah. The people of Judah and Jerusalem were struggling financially, frustrated politically, and divided socially. More than anything they needed theological spectacles through which to view and understand the events of their day and the difficult situations of their daily lives. Called to address this need, Zechariah brought a theological message that was thematically centered on two foci: the renewal of God’s people and the establishment of God’s kingdom.

First, Zechariah called for the renewal of God’s people. The very first words recorded as given to Zechariah are:

The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts (Zech. 1:2–3).

Past generations were characterized by a hardness of heart. When the Lord had repeatedly sent prophets to urge the people to turn from their wicked ways and to repent for their evil deeds, the people largely ignored them. Eventually, their unrepentant disobedience ended with the judgment of the Assyrian exile of the northern tribes and the Babylonian exile of the southern tribes.

Yet God declared in Zechariah that he was not done with his people. He called them to repent and he promised that if they did he would cleanse them. Though they were filthy from their sins and the stain of exile, God assured them that they would once again be made clean (Zech. 3:1–10). Gone would be the false prophets, the idols, and the spirit of uncleanness (Zech. 13:1–3), as well as theft and false testimonies (Zech. 5:1–4). In their place would

be mercy, justice, peace, and prosperity (Zech. 7:1–8:23). Significantly, the book of Zechariah ends with the declaration that Jerusalem will be so holy that even the common and unclean things like horses' bells and cooking pots will be inscribed with "Holy to the Lord," an inscription previously reserved for the gold plate on the high priest's turban (Ex. 28:36; 39:30).

Second, Zechariah envisioned the establishment of God's kingdom. In the section popularly known as the "night visions" (Zech. 1:7–6:8), the first and last vision form an inclusio—a repetition of certain features at the beginning and the end of a unit—with the theme that one day the Lord, the great King, will subdue all his enemies and bring about his sovereign reign upon the earth (Zech. 1:7–17; 6:1–8). The theme is continued in the second half of the book with oracles declaring the coming destruction of Israel's enemies (Zech. 9:1–8; 12:1–9). Nevertheless, the last word is not of destruction but of redemption: he will fight against the nations, subduing them so that they might turn to him as the true and rightful king (Zech. 8:22; 14:1–21). Then the Lord will be exalted as the King of the entire world, and he alone will be acknowledged as the true God (Zech. 14:9).

Moreover, the Lord will return to Zion and will work salvation for his people (Zech. 9:9–17). In fact, the book mentions Jerusalem more than forty times. Zechariah longs for the day when the Lord will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem so that they become the "Holy Mountain" and the "City of Truth" (Zech. 8:3 NIV). It will once again be teeming with people and livestock (Zech. 2:4). In 1:16, the measuring line is used not just to plan the reconstruction of the temple as in Ezekiel 40, but of the entire city of Jerusalem. In other words, the Lord plans to restore Jerusalem as the imperial city of his coming kingdom.

A lofty vision no doubt, but one which the people desperately needed to hear. Zechariah had "learned that at a time of calm in the world's history, when the nations

believed themselves secure in their own powers alone, the kingdom of God was already prepared in heaven.”<sup>13</sup> The book of Zechariah’s most foundational purpose is to lift the eyes (a recurring phrase in the book) of the people of God from their discouraging circumstances to see the bigger picture of God’s coming kingdom. If they could begin grasping that “the kingdom of God was already prepared in heaven,” they would find their discouragement melting away and a renewed motivation to do what the Lord was calling them to do, namely to build the temple, purge the social evils among them, and order their lives and communities around the priorities and expectations of God’s coming kingdom.

#### READING ZECHARIAH IN LITERARY CONTEXT

Understanding the historical backdrop of Zechariah makes for more fruitful reading, but just as important is an understanding of its literary shape. It is widely recognized that Zechariah can be divided into two separate literary halves (Zechariah 1–8 and Zechariah 9–14) because of many important functional differences.

First, Zechariah 1–8 has specific time stamps (Zech. 1:1, 7; 7:1) that locate the visions and oracles in specific historical contexts (520–518 B.C.), while Zechariah 9–14 lacks any such historical notices. Yet it is clear from the oracles in the second half of the book that they presuppose a time after the temple has been completed (515 B.C.) and operations have resumed (see Zech. 11:13; 14:20–21). Moreover, the international turmoil during the early fifth century would explain much of the eschatological thinking in Zechariah 9–14 that forecasts God’s turn to shake the nations and upend pagan rule for the benefit of his people and the establishment of his kingdom.<sup>14</sup> The difference between the first and second halves is understandable since the second half has a decidedly different focus. Zechariah

1–8 contains visions and oracles that primarily give the people a new way to view their current situation theologically. Thus specific historical markers aid the purpose of those chapters. Zechariah 9–14 tends to focus more on what God has in store for the future and does so using apocalyptic language, thereby making specific historical references unnecessary.

Second, Zechariah 1–8 tends to concentrate on general theological themes cast in mostly idyllic pictures. But Zechariah 9–14 begins to focus God’s work in the world more narrowly (and more cryptically) on a significant individual through whom God will accomplish his redemptive purposes. While Zechariah 1–8 does introduce the figure of the Branch (Zech. 3:8; 6:12), the promised individual in Zechariah 9–14 is far more three-dimensional. The reader is told of his humiliation as well as his glory, his suffering as well as his greatness. He is accepted yet rejected, conqueror yet conquered, victor yet victim.

But it would be a mistake to allow the differences between the two halves of the book to eclipse its fundamental unity. Both are concerned with Jerusalem (Zech. 1:12–16; 2:1–13; 9:8–10; 12:1–13; 14:1–21), the cleansing of the community (Zech. 3:1–9; 5:1–11; 10:9; 12:10; 13:1–2; 14:20–21), the inclusion of the nations (Zech. 2:11; 8:20–23; 9:7, 10; 14:16–19), the continuing significance of earlier prophets (Zech. 1:4; 7:4–10; 9:1–8; 11:1–3; 14:1–4), the restoration of the land’s fecundity (Zech. 8:12; 14:8), the renewal of the covenant (Zech. 8:8; 13:9), the ingathering of the exiles (Zech. 2:6; 8:7; 10:9–10), the outpouring of God’s Spirit (Zech. 4:6; 12:10), and the central role of a coming messiah (Zech. 3:8; 6:12; 9:9–10).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the unity is not just thematic but organic and progressive. The visions and oracles in Zechariah 1–8 paint a vivid picture of what God’s intervention in the world will look like, while the oracles of Zechariah 9–14 set forth the role of a unique individual who would be at the center of this intervention. Thus the book develops

along a theological trajectory that increasingly focuses on a particular messianic figure. Considering that Zechariah 9–14 is one of the most drawn upon sources of material for the gospel writers when narrating the passion of Jesus,<sup>16</sup> it shouldn't surprise us that the Gospels depict Christ as the one through whom God's intervention in the world comes. Revelation too makes ample use of the imagery and descriptions in the book of Zechariah when talking about God's final intervention at the end of the age. When read in conversation with the New Testament, Zechariah has much to offer the Christian reader.

## READING ZECHARIAH IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Reading Zechariah today can be a rich theological and devotional experience. Like the people whom Zechariah addressed, we too face discouragement. Though there are certainly some causes for hope and optimism, it is just as true that when we look around we also see social, political, and economic forces at work that sometimes lead us to despair. A few years ago, I visited a region in Wales that had formerly been one of the world's largest suppliers of coal. Now the industry has largely collapsed, leaving a wake of frustration, hopelessness, and discouragement behind. Unemployment is high, and for some, the horizons look bleak.

Other places in the world are even worse off. Poverty in parts of Asia, Africa, and South America make even the worst neighborhoods in the U.S. and Europe look appealing. Some feel they have no choice but to enter the drug trade, organized crime, or prostitution. Walking through the streets, seeing what some people have resorted to in order to survive is heartrending and overwhelming. One can see vividly how political, economic, and social structures have been hijacked by evil for destructive purposes that leave

people living in the rubble. Looking around, the problems of evil, injustice, terrorism, and corruption are so large that it is hard even to know where to begin.

As we turn our attention to the church, we find more reasons for discouragement. Baldly put, if we are God's people then why are we such a mess? Dismissing such a question with the doctrine of indwelling sin doesn't adequately explain the lack of holiness in the church; it only sharpens the question. Didn't Christ come to save us from our sin? No one expects that Christians would be perfect; sin is an inescapable part of this life. But shouldn't we look a *little* more redeemed than we do?

Sadly, even the leaders of churches, seminaries, and para-church ministries do not inspire much more confidence. The number of Christian leaders who have fallen from grace is too long to list. Even outside the purview of the newspapers that report the "high-profile" cases, most people have seen Christian leaders use bullying, manipulation, control tactics, lying, and other ungodly methods for achieving their desired ends.

Perhaps the lack of holiness would be more understandable if there were a widespread zeal among Christians to look a bit more redeemed. But tragically there is an almost apathetic attitude among many in the church toward discipleship and spiritual growth. According to a recent survey, only eighteen percent of believers indicated that spiritual growth was the most serious commitment in their life. When the others were asked why they were not more passionate about discipleship, two-thirds said that they were just too busy, and one-quarter said that they just had a general lack of interest or motivation!<sup>17</sup>

No wonder that many outside the church generally have a negative impression of Christians and the faith they claim to hold. As two researchers recently explained, "Christianity has an image problem. . . . Our research shows that many of those outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem



for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders. . . . The term ‘hypocritical’ has become fused to young people’s experience with Christianity.”<sup>18</sup>

But even personally, there are reasons for discouragement. Before we point our fingers too quickly at the church’s specks, we all would do well to look at the lumberyards in our own eyes. When we do, it isn’t pretty. Why haven’t we seen more spiritual transformation in ourselves? Why haven’t our own hearts shown more spiritual fruit? Why haven’t our own lives demonstrated more spiritual growth? Why do we continue to run to our false idols, drink from broken cisterns, and chase after false loves? Why do we look around at the world, at the church, at our communities, and at our families and have so little belief about what God is capable of doing? Perhaps we need the book of Zechariah, with its encouraging visions and convicting oracles, as much as anyone. Perhaps in our discouragement we too need to encounter God’s Word in the book of Zechariah.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What trends in the church and/or the world do you find discouraging?
2. What has discouraged you in your own life?
3. How do you tend to react to your discouragement?
4. Which discouragements can you prayerfully lay before God as you begin reading the book of Zechariah?



# 2

## THE CALL OF ZECHARIAH

( 1 : 1 – 6 )



In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, saying, “The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore, say to them, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return to me,” declares the Lord of hosts, “and I will return to you,” says the Lord of hosts. “Do not be like your fathers who did not listen or pay attention to me when the former prophets called out to them saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Return to me from your evil ways and evil practices,” declares the Lord.’ Where are your fathers now? And the prophets, did they live forever? But did not my words and my statutes which I commanded my servants the prophets overtake your fathers?” Then they returned and said, “The Lord of hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and practices, just as He purposed to do.” (Zechariah 1:1-6)

Even now the fire is burning, the heat of the word is on, the fierce glow of the Holy Spirit. . . . So for the time being treat the scripture of God as the face of God. Melt in front of it. Repent when you hear all this about your sins. And when you repent, when you torment yourself under the heat of the word, when the tears also begin to flow, don't you find yourself rather like wax beginning to drip and flow down as if in tears? (St. Augustine<sup>1</sup>)

The book of Zechariah begins with the prophet’s call, which is dated to the eighth month of the second year of Darius’ reign (October or November 520 B.C.). In the first eight chapters of Zechariah, this is one of three dates given that situate each section historically within the five crucial years of temple reconstruction (520–515 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>

Section 1 (Zechariah 1:1–6)	“In the eighth month of the second year of the reign of Darius” (1:1)	= October / November 520 B.C.
Section 2 (Zechariah 1:7–6:15)	“On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius.” (1:7)	= February 15, 519 B.C.
Section 3 (Zechariah 7:1–8:23)	“In the fourth year of King Darius . . . on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev” (7:1)	= December 7, 518 B.C.

When the word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the fall of 520 B.C., discouragement would have been widespread in and around Jerusalem. First, the city walls lay in ruins. In the ancient Near East, walls were critical to a city because they protected the people from invasion. Thus, for a city’s walls to be torn down was a great disgrace to the people who lived there (Neh. 2:17; Prov. 25:28). Second, at the center of Jerusalem was the conspicuous absence of the temple. Seventeen years earlier initial work had begun on the foundations, but that work had stalled and the aborted effort was no doubt an embarrassment to the people. Resumption of the work had begun again in September 520 B.C., but with only a few weeks of work completed, there was certainly no guarantee that this attempt wouldn’t also fizzle

out. Third, the leadership of the province was in a state of flux. Zerubbabel had been appointed as provincial governor only months before and there must have been questions about what his new leadership would bring. He seemed promising early on, but the people had had their hopes dashed before.

### THE LORD CALLS ZECHARIAH (1:1-6)

Into this age of discouragement, the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo.<sup>3</sup> Given the situation, we might expect the Lord to speak a word of great encouragement. We might anticipate something that would lift the spirits of the people. But instead the word that comes is an abrupt and pointed call to repent. Before any visions are given or promises proclaimed, the Lord calls Zechariah to preach a message of repentance to the people. The visions of hope will come, but not for another three to four months. Now is the time for the people to enter into a sustained period of reflection, repentance, and covenant recommitment.<sup>4</sup>

The call to repentance begins by drawing attention to a history of unfaithfulness, of which the current generation has been made heir. Previous generations had repeatedly provoked the Lord to anger (v. 2). The root of the Hebrew word for “anger” (*qtsf*) is used twice in verse 2, once in its verbal form and once in its noun form. Most English translations seek to communicate this “doubling” effect with the rendering “very angry.” Years of idolatry, syncretism, hypocritical worship, moral failure, exploitation of the poor, unapproved alliances with other nations, and corrupt leadership had stretched the Lord’s patience to its breaking point. Though notable exceptions existed, the nation had a long history of covenant breaking.

Zechariah calls those of his generation to do what their fathers had not done—repent. Verse 3 puts the matter plainly:

“‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord of hosts, ‘and I will return to you.’” Within the historical context it is clear that the double return is externally centered upon the temple. For the people, returning to the Lord in repentance would be demonstrated as they faithfully rebuilt the temple. For the Lord, returning would be marked by his dwelling with the people through his presence in the temple. From this verse, we might be tempted to conclude that God does not move toward us unless we first move toward him. But the text doesn’t allow this and instead we are “challenged by the thrice repeated formula, ‘thus says the Lord of hosts,’ as though we never would have thought of [turning back to God in repentance], had the Lord not drummed the idea into us!”<sup>5</sup> The message of Zechariah 1:1–6 is that the Lord has taken the initiative to come to his people through the prophet Zechariah and call them back into a renewed relationship with him.

Notice that repentance is primarily a relational act. The Lord says to the people, “Return *to me*.” It is not first and foremost about “fixing” deviant behaviors or conforming once again to prescribed ethical norms; it is about relationally reconnecting with the Lord. That is why the fathers are not only faulted for walking in evil ways and adopting evil practices but for not listening or paying attention to God (v. 4). For the postexilic community, repentance had to be more than simply rebuilding the temple. Their efforts at reconstruction had to be energized by a heartfelt return to the Lord that sought to live in covenant relationship with him.

Verses 4–6a issue a stern warning: if the people do not return, they will face the same fate as their fathers. Repeatedly, the Lord had sent prophets to former generations urging them to turn from their evil ways and return to him (v. 4). But they refused to listen and continued in their pattern of covenant disobedience. Eventually, after many generations, the warnings of judgment had caught up with the nation and judgment had overtaken them (vv. 5–6a): the northern kingdom was exiled by the Assyrians, and a

little more than a hundred years later the southern kingdom was exiled by the Babylonians. The destroyed walls, the absent temple, and the ruined economy that Zechariah's generation inherited were memorials to the evil practices of their ancestors.

This theme of the anger of the Lord toward the fathers and the resulting admonition to return from evil is seen in other prophets as well. It is found especially in Jeremiah, which highlights not only the same concepts but also uses the same vocabulary.

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, "This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

"Cut off your hair and cast it away;  
raise a lamentation on the bare heights,  
for the LORD has rejected and forsaken  
the generation of his wrath." (Jer. 7:25–29 ESV;  
see also Jer. 18:11; 23:22; 25:5; 35:15)

Thus, the opening call to repentance in Zechariah seems designed to build upon the prophecies of Jeremiah in order to teach the postexilic generation not to mimic the obstinacy of their fathers. Their fathers had ignored the warnings of Jeremiah (and others) and had suffered the disaster of the exile as a result.

Zechariah's exhortation to the postexilic community was not to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, but

instead to submit themselves to the Lord's words and statutes. Thus, verses 3–6a form a unified argument to urge the people to return to the Lord. *Return* is the key word of this opening passage, being used four times in only four verses. The Lord's faithfulness had not changed. His promises, though seemingly dormant, were not dead. Even though there were reasons for discouragement all around the people, there was a world of hope lying before them. And the doorway into that world was repentance.

But would they repent? Verse 6b indicates that they did, assuming that it refers to Zechariah's generation. This verse, however, is ambiguous and scholars have been split over whether it refers to the fathers in exile or the contemporaries of Zechariah. In the case of the former, the verse would indicate that when the exile came upon the people they eventually realized that the Lord's warnings were true and his judgment was justified. The latter would indicate that Zechariah's generation had heeded the call of verses 2–6a and had returned to the Lord with their hearts. Though it is impossible to be certain, it is more likely that it was Zechariah's generation who returned, and reflecting on their national history, confessed, "The Lord of hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and practices, just as He purposed to do." This most effectively guards the integrity of verses 4–6a, which seem to focus on the stubborn obstinacy and decidedly unrepentant hearts of previous generations.<sup>6</sup> Though problems that required rebuke remained (Zech. 5:1–11; 7:4–14), the people of Zechariah's generation did heed the call to return to the Lord, which prepared them to receive God's work among them as told in the remaining oracles of the book of Zechariah.

## REPENTANCE IS FOUNDATIONAL

Zechariah's ministry among his generation begins with a call to repentance. Everything else that follows is built



upon that foundation. This call to repent comes just weeks after the resumption of work on the temple. At this early stage, perhaps the people were tempted to exalt the building project over their love for God. Or perhaps they were tempted to the same fault the people were guilty of in Jeremiah 7—an overreliance on the temple as a talisman without an accompanying inner fidelity to the Lord.

Whatever the situation, Zechariah 1:1–6 drills down to the core need of the people. The fundamental need of the people was not a rebuilt temple; it was a renewed heart. “The temple is being restored, and that is splendid. . . . But, the work on the temple would become a monument to folly, unless it was accompanied by spiritual reconstruction.”<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it is telling that the Lord declares to a people who have already returned to the land and who have begun rebuilding the temple (an action closely associated with the Lord’s return to Zion) that they still need to return to him. In other words, it is not enough to make a geographical move and to throw up a sacred building; there must be an accompanying internal transformation of the heart. The true foundation of restoration is not the stones laid by Sheshbazzar or Zerubbabel. The true foundation of God’s kingdom work is always repentant hearts. It always begins there.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the inauguration of the kingdom of God in the ministry of Christ. At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus tightly links together the advent of the kingdom with a sharp and pointed call for the people to repent:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14–15 *ESV*)

Sometimes Jesus’ announcement is read as if it were narrowly referring to people forsaking their individual sins

and deciding to follow Jesus instead. But this misses the fullness of what Jesus was saying; it was a corporate call as well as an individual one. Jesus was declaring that God was at last becoming King of the whole world and since that moment had arrived, those who would follow him (and thus Jesus) must be characterized by repentance.<sup>8</sup> They must corporately turn from their own agendas—whether personal, national, or political—and trust in Jesus and his way of doing things instead.

After some time of preparation, Jesus sends out the twelve disciples in pairs to continue the heralding of the kingdom. As they began their ministry, the heart of their message was also that the people should repent (Mark 6:7–13). And as those acting in the name of their master, their preaching like his was accompanied with signs that the kingdom had arrived, namely exorcisms and healings. After Jesus' resurrection, when it is time for them to spread the good news of the kingdom to the rest of the world, Jesus instructs them “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47 *ESV*).

Not surprisingly the church's early days under the apostles' leadership show the same foundational emphasis on repentance. In Jerusalem, Peter in his Pentecost sermon urged those gathered there to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38 *ESV*). The “age of the Spirit” began with a call to repentance. In the following chapters in the book of Acts, the same emphasis is seen again and again in the preaching of Peter (Acts 3:19; 5:31; 8:22). In the second half of the book, as Paul spread the gospel during his missionary journeys, he too consistently led with a call to repentance, though now the corporate dimension of repentance has widened to include the mission to the Gentiles and not just to unrepentant Israel (Acts 13:24; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20)!

The same pattern has continued throughout the history of the church. God's great work always begins with people turning to him in repentance. One of the clearest examples is the birth of the Protestant Reformation, generally assigned to Luther's nailing his Ninety-five Theses on the door at Wittenberg. Luther had become concerned about the medieval practice of indulgences, prompting him to request a disputation. He followed the typical and orderly way of calling for such an academic discussion by posting the requested points of debate on the door of the church. The date was October 31, 1517.

As is well known, the first of those Ninety-five Theses struck at the heart of true spirituality, the continual call to repentance. Luther claimed, "Our Lord and Master when he says, 'Repent,' desires that the whole of life of believers should be a repentance." The second, third, and fourth theses make clear that Luther was attacking the "scholastic view of sacramental penitence, which emphasized isolated, outward acts; while Luther put the stress on the *inward* change which should extend *through life*. As long as there is sin, so long is there need of repentance."<sup>9</sup> Luther could hardly have foreseen the future consequences of such a seemingly innocuous act. However, the simple call to the church that she return to the biblical notion of repentance was to prove a historical shockwave within the Western church, with noticeable effects in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

The same principle applies to our lives as well. Like the community in Zechariah's day, we easily forget that the true foundation of God's great work is always repentant hearts. For them, the temptation would have been to throw themselves into temple building without the necessary heart-level repentance that should have motivated it. For us, the temptation is similar. When we involve ourselves in kingdom work, we so easily fall into a rhythm of do, do, do, that is detached from a heartfelt relationship with Christ based on repentance and faith. The church's programs and activities

need to be kept running. Phone calls must be made. Meetings must be planned. Agendas must be hammered out. Strategies must be drawn up. Details must be handled. We forget that kingdom work is always faulty if it is built upon the wrong foundation. Though many of us know this at a theoretical level, more often than not when it comes to our practice, we attempt much of our kingdom building efforts upon the foundation of self-sufficient execution.

But, just as in Zechariah's day, Spirit-endowed kingdom work isn't rooted in the soil of self-sufficiency, but of repentance and faith. Individually, we must continually examine our words, thoughts, actions, and attitudes, asking the Lord to search the depths of who we are and reveal to us where we need to repent and exercise faith (Ps. 139:23–24). We must even be willing to go beyond identifying the sins that come easily to mind and open ourselves up to the searching and convicting work of the Holy Spirit. As we quiet ourselves in his presence, we find that he will open our eyes to all kinds of subtle sins in the way we think, in the motivations behind what we do and say, and in the roots of our attitudes. We may be rather surprised to find that we are convicted of matters ranging from “doctrinal apostasy, personal iniquity, and tolerating or abetting social injustice.”<sup>10</sup>

In one sense, asking God to search us and convict us of our sin is (and should be) a horrifying experience. It is an exposure of who we really are. It is to come to a place where we can confess with St. Augustine, “You, Lord, . . . turned me back towards myself, taking me from behind my own back where I had put myself all the time that I preferred not to see myself. And You set me there before my own face that I might see how vile I was, how twisted and unclean and spotted and ulcerous. I saw myself and I was horrified; but there was no way to flee from myself.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, in another sense, repentance is also the gateway to joy. Like the surgeon's knife that causes pain and exposure in order to heal, repentance opens us up again to the fresh

application of God's grace in Christ to our hearts (1 John 1:9). As painful as it is to lay our sins before God by confession and repentance, God uses it to draw our eyes back to our deep and abiding need for Jesus Christ. In addition to being spiritually cathartic, this reinforces the necessity of faith in Christ because only in him do we find forgiveness and true life. In that sense, repentance is not just important for kingdom work but is indispensably foundational.

Though repentance is usually thought to be something individuals do, there is also a sense in which the corporate church must be called back to repentance if it will be effective for the kingdom in this world. The Western church has suffered seemingly endless fragmentation, much of it due to uncharitable dealings and an all-around unwillingness to subordinate minor issues to Jesus' major concern for unity (John 17). Just in American Presbyterianism alone, a chart of the history of divisions and unifications looks like a plate of noodles.

Yet, perhaps even more tragic than the needless divisions themselves is our developed callousness to the situation. We have become so accustomed to living in a fragmented church that "the most manifest mark of the divided Church appears to be its own insensibility to the symptoms of its condition. . . . The Church has ceased to repent. Such is the constriction given birth by a division that ceases to offend."<sup>12</sup> Many churches and denominations seem more willing to quibble over relatively minor governmental issues, shades of doctrinal difference, or even cultural preferences than express the credibility of Jesus Christ through sacrificial unity (John 17:21–23). As a result, the church largely forfeits its ability to speak prophetically to a broken world and cripples its ability to be a signpost of the kingdom of God. Divisions before a watching world sap away the church's saltiness and snuff out its light (Matt. 5:13–16).

But Zechariah 1:1–6, along with the ministry of Jesus, the twelve disciples, Paul, and scores of Christians throughout

church history, shows us that the only foundation suitable for Spirit-endowed kingdom work is repentant hearts, both individually and corporately. As we acknowledge our own sin for what it is—grievous and offensive to a holy God—and turn from it with godly contrition, we open ourselves up again to the renewing grace of God in Christ. We find afresh the joy of our salvation and experience God’s Spirit upholding and sustaining us (Ps. 51:12). And we find our relationship deepening with the Lord who is always more eager to forgive than we are to confess. As John Chrysostom once preached, “You do not so much desire to be forgiven as he desires to forgive you your sins.”<sup>13</sup>

Over time, as we practice heartfelt repentance and turning back to the Lord in faith, we find that we are being transformed from the inside out, being more and more conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). St. Ambrose once recounted an episode of a young man who was returning home after an extended journey. During his time away, the man had been set free from his attachment to a prostitute. After he had returned home, he one day ran into the object of his former passion who stopped him and said, “Do you not know me, I am still myself?” “That may be,” replied the man, “but I am not myself.”<sup>14</sup> Such is the life built on repentance. Over time, the Lord transforms us such that we are no longer our former selves; the old passes, behold all things become new (2 Cor. 5:17). If only we would return to the Lord in repentance, imagine what he might do in our own lives, in our churches, and in the world.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How have you seen repentance as something foundational to growth in your own spiritual life?
2. Are you accustomed to thinking of repentance as a habit? Is it something you practice daily?

3. In what areas of your life do you need to repent? Are there specific thoughts, words, actions, or attitudes that you need to turn from?
4. What are ways that your lack of repentance adversely affects the whole church?
5. Is your church a church of repentance? How do you know?





# PART TWO

THE NIGHT VISIONS

