

Zechariah 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 October 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 12. The oracle of the word of the Lord concerning Israel. On that day, declares the Lord, I will strike every horse with panic, and its rider with madness.

But for the sake of the house of Judah, I will keep my eyes open, when I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. Then the clans of Judah shall say to themselves, The inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through the Lord of hosts their guard.

On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves. And they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples, while Jerusalem shall again be inhabited in its place in Jerusalem.

And the Lord will give salvation to the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem may not surpass that of Judah. On that day the Lord will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the Lord going before them.

And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

[1 : 53] On that day the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning for Hadad-rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land shall mourn, each family by itself, the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves, the family of the Shimeites by itself, and their wives by themselves, and all the families that are left, each by itself, and their wives by themselves. Zechariah chapter 12 begins a new oracle. Chapters 9 to 11 were the first oracle or burden, and this is the second. It runs from chapter 12 to chapter 14 to the conclusion of the book. It's introduced as an oracle concerning Israel and speaks of the Lord's judgment upon the nations, his purging and transformation of Jerusalem. The oracle will end with an account of a new holy Jerusalem. Both chapter 12 and chapter 14 contain accounts of sieges of Jerusalem. However, Peter Lighthouse suggests that these are two different sieges.

The first siege of Jerusalem in this chapter is one brought about by surrounding nearby nations, and that siege is effectively broken. The second siege of Jerusalem involves all nations, and that siege is successful. The city is captured. Another possibility is that these are describing two different stages of a single siege, or maybe it's the same event viewed from different perspectives.

After introducing the oracle as the word of the Lord concerning Israel, we have a doxology that underlines the fact that the Lord who speaks is the creator God. He's the one who creates, and he's the one who can recreate. The oracle concerns a great salvation that the Lord will bring about through Jerusalem. Jerusalem will become a cup of staggering to all of the surrounding peoples.

This imagery is found in Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 7, for instance. The cup of wrath is a means of intoxicating people with the wine of the Lord's judgment. In that verse from Jeremiah, we read, Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken. The nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad. The intoxicating cup of the Lord's wrath is an image that is used on a number of occasions within the book of Jeremiah. The cup is handed round from nation to nation, and finally Babylon, which has been the cup for other nations, will receive the cup itself.

The second half of verse 2 suggests that the siege of Jerusalem is one in which Judah also participates. There is a sort of civil war scenario here, where Judah has joined the surrounding nations to attack the city of Jerusalem. However, even with all of the neighboring peoples, and Judah itself gathered against her, Jerusalem will be victorious. It is also possible to read this as

stating that the siege that faces Jerusalem also afflicts Judah, rather than Judah participating in the siege against Jerusalem with the surrounding nations. In addition to being described as a cup of staggering, Jerusalem is also described as a heavy stone for all of the peoples. It's an obstruction, it's something that cannot easily be moved. Any who try to do so will injure themselves.

[5 : 07] In the gathering together of the nations, we might also hear an echo of Psalm 2 verses 1 to 9. Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, Let us burst their bonds apart, and cast away their cords from us.

He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. The nations have assembled, or perhaps we should see this, as the nations have been assembled by the Lord, against Jerusalem, against, by implication, his anointed. Their assaults, however, are entirely doomed to failure.

One of the curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 28 to 29 reads as follows, The Lord will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind, and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways, and you shall be only oppressed and robbed continually, and there shall be no one to help you. In verse 4, this judgment seems to fall upon the enemies of Jerusalem. Their horses and riders are smitten with panic and madness. Our reading of the second half of verse 4 depends upon our understanding of the place of Judah relative to Jerusalem and the other nations. Has Judah joined with the other nations against Jerusalem, or is Judah also suffering the attack? If the latter is the case, then Judah seems to take heart from seeing the way that the Lord is on the side of Jerusalem. If the former, then Jerusalem seems to repent and turn to the Lord. If this were the case, then the end of verse 4 describes the Lord sparing Judah, not visiting upon Judah the judgment that the other nations suffer. If, however, it is the case that Judah is also the object of the nation's attacks, then the Lord is here protecting Judah.

The clans of Judah will be large extended kin groups, much larger than families, but smaller than tribes. Seeing the way that the Lord is strengthening Jerusalem, they either take heart or have a change of heart. The result of this is that they become successful against the nations that have gathered against Jerusalem. The imagery of the flaming torch and the blazing pot recalls theophanic elements from the vision of Abraham in his deep sleep in Genesis chapter 15. Bearing the glory of the Lord, this renewed Judah is successful against all of its adversaries. Jerusalem would also be successful and made secure. The glory of this great victory will be shared out among all of the people, not just belonging to Jerusalem and the house of David, but fully including Judah. The Lord would protect but also empower his people. They will be so strengthened that the heroics of David that are described in places like 1 Samuel would be commonplace among them. Meanwhile, the messianic house of David, which we should presumably associate with the promised branch, would be like God or the angel of the Lord. In the Exodus, Moses is told that he will be like God to Pharaoh and also like God to Aaron.

[8 : 24] King David is compared to the angel of the Lord by the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Samuel chapter 14 verses 17 and 20 and then by Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel chapter 19 verse 27. Through his people, the Lord would win a great victory over all of the nations that came against Jerusalem. We might here recall the way that Judah is compared to the Lord's bow with Ephraim as his arrow and then how the people are compared to a war horse for the Lord. In verse 10, the Lord pours out a spirit of grace upon his people and as a result, they start to mourn. They mourn over him whom they have pierced. Who is this one that they have pierced?

In the context, it seems to be associated with the Lord himself. Whether this figure is the Lord himself or one closely related to the Lord is not immediately clear, but there are likely some clues to be derived from the wider context. If we recall the second half of the preceding chapter, we should remember the 30 pieces of silver. There we noted that in Exodus chapter 21 verse 32, 30 pieces of silver was the restitution given to a master for a gourd servant. Having received the 30 pieces of silver, Zechariah threw them in the house of the Lord, presumably to the molder in the foundry.

The Lord declares that this was the price at which his people had valued him. The figure that they mourn here in chapter 12 is described as like an only child. The figure seems to be a Davidic figure. Putting the pieces together, it would seem that the pierced one is the Davidic branch. He's the covenantal son of the Lord. He's the servant of the Lord who has been gored by the people who have rejected the Lord and in rejecting the Lord have rejected his servant. The mourning over this figure is compared to the mourning in the plain of Megiddo. This is presumably looking back to 2 Kings chapter 23 verse 29 where King Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho as Josiah went out to meet him at Megiddo.

Josiah was the reforming king of Judah and he was the one last chance for the people. After Josiah, there were a string of wicked kings that led ultimately to the destruction of the nation. [10:29] The mourning for Josiah is described in 2 Chronicles chapter 35 verses 24 to 25. So his servants took him out of the chariot and carried him in his second chariot and brought him to Jerusalem. And he died and was buried in the tombs of his fathers. All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah. And all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their lament to this day. They made these a rule in Israel. Behold, they are written in the laments. The verses that follow describe what seems to be a comprehensive mourning of the whole of the people. The whole land is mourning and each of the families are mourning. Various theories have been advanced to try and explain the names that are included here. Why Nathan and Shimei? Some have tried to understand the houses, David, Nathan, Levi and Shimei, in terms of prophet, priest and king.

David being the king, Nathan the prophet, Levi the priest, leaving Shimei. Some have connected Nathan with the prophet of David's court and Shimei with the relative of Saul who opposed David. A more likely explanation is to connect Nathan with David and Shimei with Levi. Shimei was the second son of Gershom, Levi's first son. Nathan was one of the sons of David by Bathsheba. The line of Christ is traced through Nathan in Luke chapter 3. Perhaps what we're supposed to see here is a mourning that includes people throughout the land and all different statuses and offices. People throughout both the extended priestly and kingly houses. Stepping back from the chapter and seeing the bigger picture, we should note a number of themes that recall the exodus. In the gathering together of the people against Jerusalem, we might recall the pursuing of the children of Israel by the Egyptians. The glory of the Lord that is described as surrounding them in verse 6 might recall the pillar of cloud and fire, for instance. The angel of the Lord going before them might recall the exodus again. Exodus chapter 23, verse 20. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. All of these details recall the first stages of the exodus and most particularly the Passover. In verse 10, we see this most clearly. They weep over the pierced one like a firstborn child.

This, of course, is reminiscent of the Egyptians mourning over the firstborn children after the 10th plague with the death of the firstborn sons. How ought we to understand the fulfillment of this prophecy? I think an important thing to take into account at the beginning is that the prophecy is not necessarily intending to give us a clear blow-by-blow account of what's going to take place. A prophecy is not just a bare prediction of something that's going to happen in the future. Rather, it gives us the general shape and meaning of events that are going to occur. From a knowledge of that general shape and meaning, we can't easily predict the specific form of events in which that general shape and meaning of the Lord's fulfillment will be realized. There are a great many potential surprises in that area. This prophecy refers, I believe, to the death and resurrection of Christ and its aftermath. Most obviously, there's the piercing of the firstborn son. That text, of course, is alluded to in John chapter 19 verses 34 to 37.

[13:44] But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness. His testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth, that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled.

Not one of his bones will be broken. And again another scripture says, They will look on him whom they have pierced. And then in Revelation chapter 1 verse 7, As Anthony Petterson points out, the events of verse 10 are fulfilled in Pentecost and its aftermath.

The spirit of grace that is poured out upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem is the Holy Spirit that Christ receives and pours out upon his church at Pentecost. As Peter preaches with boldness, the people are cut to the heart and repent. They mourn what they have done. So

what then is the attack of the nations upon Jerusalem? Petterson argues that this is fulfilled in a surprising manner. Christ, the David that goes before the people, is the target of the attack. What's more, this sort of connection can be seen in the words of the apostles. For instance, in Acts chapter 4 verses 24 to 28. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. The apostles here are presenting a war as having taken place, a war focused upon the anointed one, the branch, the Messiah. As predicted by Zechariah, but realized in a form that no one could possibly have predicted, the nations did indeed gather together at Jerusalem for a battle. The Messiah was besieged. It seemed he was defeated, but the siege was broken, and he was victorious. Other details of the chapter start to come into focus. Jerusalem is described as becoming like a burdensome stone. In the Gospels, of course, Christ is described as the rock of stumbling. Matthew chapter 21 verses 42 to 44. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people producing its fruits, and the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. Once we recognize that this is referring to Christ, many of the details that might be scandalous otherwise start to come into focus too.

David shall be like God, like the angel of the Lord going before them. Who better to speak of in such language than Christ himself, who is God, who is the angel of the Lord? Likewise in verse 10, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced. God in human flesh, and Jesus Christ, is the one who has pierced. As they look on Christ, they are looking upon God.

[17:07] Petterson writes, This gathering against the Messiah in Jerusalem proved to be the day of salvation for God's people, even though it involved the Messiah's death. A further parallel with chapter 12 verse 10 can be seen in Acts, where after Jesus' death, God's spirit is poured out on the around 120 believers in Jerusalem, and God-fearing Jews are then cut to the heart and repent. Hence the New Testament connects this day with Jesus' death. Jesus ends up drinking the cup of God's wrath, Luke chapter 22 verse 42, so that God's people from Israel and the nations do not have to. Bodo rightly comments, God's rescue of Jerusalem and defeat of the nations was already accomplished prior to AD 70.

Although unknown to the Jews and Gentiles at the time, Christ's death on the cross was God's means of delivering Jerusalem. Yet the New Testament also connects the day with Jesus' return, when all the nations will mourn the one who was pierced. For example, Revelation chapter 1 verse 7, The result of the action of the servant of the Lord and the branch is an emboldening of the people, an empowering of them. The people are made strong and courageous by the gift of the Spirit of Christ.

Their hearts are also softened, so that they can turn back to the Lord. We might see in the final verses of the chapter the people turning back to the shepherd that they had rejected. As the ox mourns the servant that it gored, the people mourn the king that they pierced.

Restoration becomes possible once more. The hope of the nation that once perished at the death of Josiah is now rekindled. Hope is restored, and the people are equipped to stand against their foes. A question to consider. The fulfilment of this prophecy in the New Testament does not look like anything that people would have expected. How does this prophecy help us more fully to understand the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection and the events of Pentecost and its aftermath?