

Zechariah 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 8. And the word of the Lord of hosts came, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath.

Thus says the Lord, I have returned to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age, and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts, If it is marvellous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvellous in my sight, declares the Lord of hosts. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Let your hands be strong, you who in these days have been hearing these words from the mouth of the prophets who were present on the day that the foundation of the house of the Lord of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built. For before those days there was no wage for man, or any wage for beast, neither was there any safety from the foe for him who went out or came in, for I set every man against his neighbour. But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the Lord of hosts. For there shall be a sowing of peace, the vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew, and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong. For thus says the Lord of hosts, As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

Fear not, these are the things that you shall do. Speak the truth to one another. Render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath. For all these things I hate, declares the Lord. And the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts. Therefore, love, truth, and peace. Thus says the Lord of hosts, People shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go at once to entreat the favour of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts.

I myself am going. Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you. Zechariah chapters 7 and 8 are a bridge from the visions of the opening six chapters to the oracles of chapters 9 to 14. Chapter 7 began with a delegation sent by the people of Bethel, inquiring about the continued practice of the fast of the fifth month. That fast commemorated the destruction of the temple, but now that the temple is being rebuilt, it's natural to wonder whether it should be continued. The message of Zechariah in response to that question continues in this chapter. In these two chapters there is also a gathering of themes that run throughout the book.

[4 : 02] Chapter 7 presented the cautionary example of past generations, while chapter 8 articulates a vision of hope from which people can draw confidence for the future. The material of these chapters can be divided by prophetic formulae, of the kind that we see in chapter 7 verse 1,

verse 4, verse 8, chapter 8 verse 1, and chapter 8 verse 18. Chapter 8 verse 1 stands apart from the other formulae in speaking of the word of the Lord of hosts coming, without specifying to whom it came, although we should presume that it was Zechariah. Along with these prophetic formulae dividing larger sections of material, we have the formula, thus says the Lord of hosts, by which the material of chapter 8 can be divided into ten short thematically clustered oracles. Reading the oracles of this chapter, we should often recognize echoes of language of earlier parts of the book. For instance, the declaration of the Lord's jealousy for Jerusalem recalls places like chapter 1 verses 13 to 16.

And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, cry out. Thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease. For while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy.

My house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. The declaration that the Lord has returned to Zion in verse 3 recalls chapter 2 verse 10. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. Similar resonances can be found throughout this section, serving to underline previous messages delivered both by Zechariah and by Haggai. It is quite likely that this material from Zechariah was compiled at a later point by the editor or editors of the book of Zechariah, or perhaps by Zechariah himself, and arranged in order to accent such themes. The jealousy of the Lord is a prominent dimension of the Old Testament's witness to his character, most notably within the Ten Commandments. As a jealous God, the Lord will not tolerate any who would take his glory from him, or who would seek to attack, destroy, or estrange his people from him. Nor will he passively tolerate his people's own betrayal. The jealousy of the Lord is a consistent reason for his salvation of his people. He will not allow other powers to take his people from him. He will also act for the sake of his great name. The jealousy of the Lord can, among other things, be understood as an expression of his love, a love that will not let his people go. As in the third vision, of the man with the measuring line, verse 3 speaks of the Lord's return to dwell in Zion, in the midst of his people. Through his presence within her, Jerusalem will become the faithful city, starting to reflect the Lord's character. Alternatively, we could interpret this statement as a reference to the Lord's own faithfulness, by which the city will be named. The Lord's holy presence will set her apart as holy to himself. The former prophets had warned of the desolation of the streets of the wicked city, the silencing of its songs, the stilling of its squares, and the cessation of its commerce. As Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 21 expressed this, For death has come up into our windows. It has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets, and the young men from the squares. The prophetic vision of a good city is a place where the elderly can pass their final years enjoying rest from their labours, and where carefree children can play in safety. It's a place of joy, play, and song, where the gentle passage of life through its seasons, and from older generations to their successors, is visible and peaceful. The restoration of the joy of the city is also declared in places like Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 10 to 11. Thus says the Lord, In this place of which you say, It is a waste without man or beast, in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever, for I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord. This promised future is remarkable, and may seem incredible, perhaps meeting with incredulity from some who struggle to see beyond the current situation of the city.

[8 : 47] However, the Lord, who has the power to achieve this, does not suffer from the same constraints of vision. The account of the restoration of Jerusalem and its future peace continues in verses 7 and 8.

The Lord's people, who had been scattered, will be regathered, a promise familiar from places like Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 7 to 8. For thus says the Lord, sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations.

Proclaim, give praise, and say, O Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the

blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labour.

Together, a great company, they shall return here. A surprising detail in Zechariah's prophecy is the reference to the east and the west countries. It is far more typical for the scriptures to speak of the north and the south, even though Egypt was in the southwest, and Mesopotamia in the northeast. However, the actual reference is from the land of the rising and the land of the going in of the sun, which suggests that the Lord is going to gather his exiles from the whole circuit of the sun's daytime passage, from one end of the heavens to another, a far more comprehensive gathering than from the east country and from the west country might imply.

[10:10] He will manifest his character as the faithful and righteous God as he saves and restores his people. Verse 8 includes the familiar covenant formula of, I shall be their God, and they shall be my people.

The longest of the ten oracles of the chapter is the sixth, running from verse 9 to verse 13, bookended by the charge, let your hands be strong, encouraging the people in the task of rebuilding the temple.

This prophecy most likely refers not to the initial founding of the temple under the governorship of Sheshbaza, but to the restarting of the work on the 24th day of the sixth month of the second year of Darius.

Zechariah's prophecy here recalls that of Haggai chapter 2 verse 15 to 19. Now then, consider from this day onward, before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail, yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord.

[11:19] Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded nothing.

But from this day on I will bless you. As in that prophecy, there is a contrast between the former days of lack and danger and the days of prosperity, plenty, blessing and security that will follow. Judah and his land will be fruitful, experiencing the blessings of the covenant rather than its curses, and in fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, Judah would become a byword for blessing among the nations.

The Lord's judgment upon his people had been driven by a set purpose. His purpose to bless Jerusalem and Judah is no less determined. At the end of the preceding chapter in verses 9 and 10, the Lord had reminded the people through Zechariah of the message that he had given their forebears by the prophets prior to the exile.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.

[12:33] The father's refusal to pay attention had led to their destruction. However, as the generation of the remnant of the returnees heed the warning of the Lord delivered in their own generation, they will experience the Lord's determined purpose to do them good.

Chapter 7 had begun with the inquiry of the men of Bethel concerning the practice of the fast of the fifth month, commemorating the destruction of the temple, now that the temple was being rebuilt in Jerusalem, should the situation change.

Along with the fast of the fifth month, there was also the fast of the seventh, to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah the governor and the end of Judah's autonomy. Here, toward the end of the section, the Lord addresses the question of the men of Bethel again.

The Lord speaks not only of the fasts of the fifth and the seventh months, but also of fasts of the fourth and tenth months, likely two other fasts related to the downfall of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's walls had been breached in the fourth month, and the siege of the city had begun in the tenth. It is possible that various fasts were practiced at different places in the land, and that not every city observed the same days.

[13:40] Addressing a wider audience, Zechariah might be mentioning fast days beyond those in view when his word was more focused upon Bethel. Mourning and the sorrowful memory of the past would be eclipsed by the celebration of new blessings.

Fasts would be transformed into feasts. This transformation is one that would be received and enjoyed by the people as they lived in terms of the Lord's blessing and liberation. The gift of the law at Sinai, for instance, was the means by which Israel could live out the reality of their freedom that had been wrought by the Exodus.

The more that they rejected the way of justice and faithfulness, the more that they would find themselves being bound once more, subdued by oppressors, and suffering the consequences of their sins.

For this reason, the promise of coming blessing here is attended by a charge to Several of the prophets speak of pilgrimages to Jerusalem from the nations in the days to come.

As Zion is raised up, people will flock to her from the peoples, bringing gifts and tribute to the Lord and seeking his face and his favor. Indeed, the book of Zechariah itself will end with another development of this theme.

[14 : 58] Jerusalem's blessing will have a magnetic effect for others, drawing them to its light. This theme continues in the tenth and final oracle of the chapter. Gentiles will be so eager to join themselves to the Lord's people that ten of them will grasp a single Jew in order to accompany him to Jerusalem and to identify with the Jews as the Lord is manifestly with that people.

This might, among other things, be seen as both a reversal of Babel, the mention of the men from different tongues, and a fulfillment of the blessing of Abraham. A question to consider, can you think of any further ways in which this chapter alludes back to earlier parts of Zechariah and Haggai?

