

# *Zechariah*

THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS



*Jim McGuiggan*

***THE DAY  
OF  
SMALL THINGS***

Reflections on the Book of Zechariah

**Jim McGuigan**



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# *The Day of Small Things*

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*For*

Gerald & Bobbie Paden

&

Doyle & Louise Gilliam

Who have learned and loved and lived and  
taught the Gospel of the one true God and  
Father of the Lord Jesus Christ



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## INTRODUCTION

This certainly unimpressive little book of mine is about a time in ancient Israel's history when God spoke to many that saw their day as unimpressive; a "day of small things."

"So, you don't think much of the little church building we've just completed?" That's what the prophet Haggai said to some very old men who'd seen Solomon's temple in all its glory [2:3; Ezra 3:11-13]. They were weeping out loud. And why wouldn't they for what was this little stone building compared with the "wise one's" majestic temple?

The little stone building matched the size and mood of the tiny band of harassed returnees from Babylon. "Disappointment, Disappointment! All is Disappointment!" would well have matched the era.

They looked around at God-denying circumstances and seeing no glory that left them breathless they longed for former days—days they were sure were better than the current ones. Poor souls that we humans are, we long for glory, obvious triumph and the bits and pieces we see can hardly be called glorious or triumphant. There are too many bad things—stubborn, seemingly indestructible—and the rest are "small things". It was hard for them to look at the tiny building and connect it with Isaiah 44:24-28 and chapter 45 where the God who is the Lord of history and empires said he would get the king of the world to build His house and city.

And that was the best He could do—the creator of the universe [45:12, 18] builds this...this...? And the glory spoken of in 45:15 turns out to be this pathetic community ghettoed in this



pint-sized corner of the “promised” land? Zechariah didn’t deny that his day was a day of “small things”; he just warned against despising such a day and against seeing God only in the “wow” or “awesome” times. Zechariah says God is there where you would least expect Him.

As the Bible tells it, it isn’t unusual for the Almighty God to be at work in the unimpressive as well as the mind-boggling. Why, there was even a day when he started something with a young working-class carpenter that looked promising. But that was 2,000 years ago and even those that knew him could see nothing in him worth talking about [Mark 6:2-3], and anyway, the carpenter’s story ended with him being nailed to a cross.

Well, it’s true that some said he rose from the dead and is now King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But look around and listen, wouldn’t you think if the Carpenter was Lord of Lords that things would be better? If everything has been put under his feet how does it happen that everything doesn’t look or sound like it’s under his feet? I seem to recall a writer saying that very thing [Hebrew 2:8-9] but I notice he rests everything he says on “seeing Jesus”. But seeing Jesus where? How?

Hmmm, maybe there’s a way of seeing, a trusting way; maybe His power is only truly and fully seen and perfected in weakness. [I seem to remember Paul saying that somewhere.] Maybe the real power invested in God’s People isn’t in blinding success or grand appearance but in its steadfast obedient trust in God in the face of “days of small things” when messengers of Satan are forced to act as message boys for the Holy One; the way we see them function in 2 Corinthians 12 and in the book of Job’s first two chapters. Among the many other truths it brings the book of Zechariah drives this central message home. *Trust and obey!*

# PART 1

## BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTES & COMMENTS

God brought Babylon down! God gave Babylon her place at the head of the nations (Daniel 2:37-38; 4:32) but like every other great power God granted that power that Babylon might act as his minister and be the channel through which He would bring about a greater measure of justice and the creation goods would make their way to the needy (see this in Daniel 4:27; see also Ezekiel 16:49-50 and Romans 13:1-7).

Isaiah 13 & 14 speaks of the fall of Babylon in terms of uncreation. The heavens and the earth are affected and the underworld mocks the Babylonian king. It's important to remember that the prophet is here dealing with empire structures and not every man, woman girl and boy that lives in the Babylonian world. It's an empire structure that God brings down, it's a "world"—a world created by the Babylonian power-brokers, a world shaped by the powerful; it's the "world" of the powerful in which everyone must live whether they like it or not.

It's important to remember that in historical fact God brought Babylon down almost without a sound. There was no war—it was pretty much a quiet surrender to the Persians once Cyrus' troops entered the city via the lowered water of the Euphrates. The description of the fall in Isaiah 13 is manifestly a visionary one; the text wasn't literally fulfilled!

The gigantic empire that succeeded Babylon in 539 was headed up by Cyrus who issued decrees that permitted all the exiled nations to go back home if that was their wish. When he issues a decree concerning Jewish returnees he ascribes his victories and his power to Yahweh, the God of Israel (see Ezra 1:1-4). It's obvious enough that this was a political move since on the Cyrus Cylinder he ascribes his victories to the chief Babylonian god Marduk who, he said, called him to establish peace in Babylon. [Google for information on the Cylinder.]

Ezra 2 tells of the return of 42,000 plus Jews and Ezra 4 tell us how they gained enemies, of the decree from Persia that prohibited them to complete the building of the temple (and city) because their enemies had convinced Persia that what was being built was a fortress which would act as a center for rebellion when the Jews set up their own king. All this led to a cessation of temple building and Haggai and Zechariah came on the scene about eighteen years later and urged the completion of the temple. In the meantime—between the arrival back home and the rise of Haggai and Zechariah the returnees had been self-centered and self-serving and God chastised them. See the book of Haggai for a discussion about that.

With the arrival of the two prophets the building of the temple began again and was finally completed. Later around 458 with the arrival of Ezra and company further evils are dealt with and then in something like 445 Nehemiah arrives and completes the building of the city (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

In the middle of such history with its wars and rumors of wars, with its court intrigues [see Esther] the unseen God—not Marduk or any other, it was Yahweh who was at

work making his sovereignty known; at least that's what the prophet Zechariah said, but who believed it? Where was the "proof" of it?

It was easy to see when Assyria had all the power—just look at the trail of ruined cities and butchered people they left behind. It was easy enough to see Babylon had the power—simply look at how it [with allies] devastated Nineveh and chased Assyrian kings across the Euphrates. And in the book of Zechariah what does Yahweh appeal to as proof of his lordship? A little stone church building that even older Jews wept at and a small town that would later be built by a handful of hard-working people, sitting on top of a hill. Visibly, it was indeed a day of "small things". That was the historical setting at its visible best—those were the facts and they say, "You can't get away from the facts." But then Yahweh had a way of dealing with "the facts" that one "can't get away from."

## ***THE PROPHETS WHO SPOKE TO THE PEOPLE***

We don't all live in the same world and choose different things out of it; many men and women live in "worlds" altogether different from ours and our everyday speech acknowledges that. The world we personally experience is the world that's shaped for us and the world we're shaped by. It's true, I suppose, that the vast majority of us experience so many things alike that it's easy to believe there's only one "world".

There was a class of people who in certain periods looked, listened and said they saw things painfully different than most everyone else saw them. They were the prophets. The prophets were humans and they lived in the world with their fellows; they were in it, but in lots of ways they weren't of it.

Before we get around to asking what the prophets mean to us we must ask [as Abraham Heschel has taught us] what "they meant to God...For prophecy is a sham unless it is experienced as a word of God swooping down on man and converting him into a prophet."

They were shepherds, diplomats, farming types and orchard workers, priests and letter-writers but every now and then they saw and heard things that stunned them and their words became God's words and his words theirs. One who began as a boy prophet, suddenly sees things about his nation and his words become God's: "Be appalled at this O heavens, and shudder with great horror...My people have committed two sins; they have forsaken me, the spring of living water and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." Jeremiah 2:12-13

The horror expressed is not God in a divine sulk; it's the outburst of a righteous God who has been ever faithful but has

been abandoned by the nation he loves; a nation that will die of thirst. It's treachery but it's more than treachery; it's self-destruction. It's that and more that the prophet sees. He sees the idolaters remaining faithful to their dumb and useless gods and sees his own people rejecting the living God for worthless idols [2:10]. Well, alright, so they've taken to worship other gods but why make a big deal out of it? The prophet expects the heavens that have been created by Yahweh—to shudder with dread and astonishment and that prophetic expectation is generated by the living God and becomes the word of God to Israel and the world, for if the light goes out in Israel the nations of the world are left to darkness. But is the prophetic response not overkill?

Heschel said this: "To us a single act of injustice— cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world." [1993, page 4]

The prophets spoke in this fashion because they were taught by and understood God. They knew well about the Fall, about the judgment on the world in Noah's day [which was "uncreation"]. The prophets believed that Sin was a single human narrative and what Judah did was a recapitulation of the Garden rebellion and the repeating of the pre-flood behavior. So when they spoke as they did in Isaiah 13 & 34, Zephaniah 1 and Jeremiah 4 they did it with good reason. See some later remarks on this.

## ***THE PEOPLE THE PROPHETS SPOKE TO***

Like every other nation Israel had a history. Ask an American how America came to be America or an Iranian how Iran came to be Iran or a Chinese person how China came to be China and each would tell you a story. In each story there would be moments and events that distinguished that nation from all others.

The nation all the prophets spoke to was unlike any other nation on the earth. In what way was that true? Here's a central part of the Moses story in Deuteronomy 4:32-35,

“Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any other god tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You were shown these things so that you might know the Lord is God; besides him there is no other.”

If you had asked an ancient Israelite, “Who are you people?” he would have told you a story like no other nation's story. (See the credo rehearsed by the Israelite when he came to offer the Firstfruits in Deuteronomy 26:5-10.) The God named Yahweh never entered into a promissory covenant with any other nation through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No other nation went down into Egypt to be welcomed as resident aliens and

then to endure generations as slaves to Pharaoh. No other nation was declared to be Yahweh's "firstborn son" and delivered as the result of a series of miraculous signs, brought miraculously across the Red Sea, brought into a covenant relationship with Yahweh at Mount Sinai, sustained for more than a generation in a wilderness and settled in a homeland that had been promised centuries earlier. These events wrought by a God who took Yahweh as his covenant name are what constituted Israel as Israel.

"You only have I known of all the families of the earth." Amos 3:2. "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth." Deuteronomy 7:6; 26:19; Exodus 19:5-6; Psalm 135:4; see Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9.

Yahweh did all that but why he did it is also part of Israel's identity. God's purpose in doing what he did was as much a part of what he did as the acts by which he did it. God created this nation so that they would be a light to the Gentiles who were living in the darkness of polytheistic idolatry, so that Israel would bring light and blessing to all the families of the earth [Isaiah 49:5-7; Genesis 12:1-3; 22:18; 26:4; 28:13-14].

What was happening in Israel's experience went far beyond Israel. "Israel's history comprised a drama of God and all men. God's kingship and man's hope were at stake in Jerusalem. God was alone in the world, unknown or discarded...Here was one land, one people, cherished and chosen for the purpose of transforming the world." [Heschel, pages 14-15]



Since Israel has no identity as Israel without her history it follows that to reject Yahweh and go after other gods meant they would have to invent a new history to explain themselves even to themselves; they would have to tell a new and different gospel story every word of which would be no gospel story at all [compare Paul's treatment of a different story in Galatians 1:6-9]. Israel was hardly out of bondage when they moved in that direction and made a golden calf and said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you up out of the land of Egypt." In doing this they not only distorted the truth about God they distorted the truth about themselves and so they couldn't function as a light and salvation-bearer for the world. In this they became enemies of God's purpose; they became enemies of the way God chose to bless his entire human family.

Israel's very existence as a redeemed People was to be the visible embodiment of the gospel they offered to the world and that was to be expressed in their national faith. God's sons and daughters who honored the Holy One in songs, feasts and offerings, in the repudiation of idolatry and in their God-imaging righteousness in daily life [Exodus 19:4-6; 24:1-8; Deuteronomy 5:1-32] were light in a world of darkness because as his beloved children they imaged God [note Ephesians 5:1-2].

The nation to whom Zechariah and the prophets spoke did not create itself. Isaiah repeatedly speaks of Israel in terms associated with creation.

"But now, this is what the Lord says—he who created you O Jacob, he who formed you O Israel; fear not...everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom

I formed and made.” (Isaiah 43:1, 7; see also 49:1, 5-6 with Acts 13:46-47, Jeremiah 1:4-5 and Galatians 1:15.)

Texts like these echo the history of Adam and Eve who chose independence from God and threw in their lot with “a god” [2 Corinthians 4:4]. Created to image God they rejected him and would make their own way in the world. In texts like this one Israel as Israel is seen as a new creation, a new beginning and was called to live out her life in a new world. In Ezekiel 37:1-14 we have a picture of Israel resurrected and that picture echoes the creation of Adam with the Spirit of God entering them as it did Adam and generating life out of lifelessness. And that “resurrection” foreshadowed the resurrection of the One in whom Israel’s history is recapitulated but in glorious righteousness and the One in whom Israel’s hope is focused [see Acts 23:6; 24:14-16; 26:5-7].

This small discouraged and very troubled highland “nation” of nearly fifty thousand people who returned under Zerubbabel from Babylon was a brand pulled out of the fire [Zechariah 3:2], charred and dirty, but it was the visible expression of the patient and faithful God’s continued purpose. It was to this small people in a day of small things that Haggai and Zechariah spoke. See Ezra 2:64-65; Nehemiah 7:4 and 11:1-2

## ***THE PROPHET'S SUBTEXT & GOSPEL***

God himself is the ultimate background to the books of Zechariah and Haggai and to any other book in the Bible!

The God the prophets speak for and about existed prior to and beyond history but he speaks and acts within it, unveiling himself and his eternal purpose not from a great cosmic distance but there—right there—where people sin and die and starve and agonize and he does it through prophetic men and women with whom he has covenanted.

The prophetic business was not to bring daily bulletins about the specific moves of the nations, no summaries of the latest political headlines or general suggestions about how the returnees could become more morally upright; their message was more specific than that. We find some moral exhortation and rebuke in the texts before us, of course, but they weren't rationally deduced moral imperatives. They were based on an already existing covenant relationship with a God who revealed himself and chose Israel as his covenant partner and with a specific commission for them. The prophets functioned to strengthen Israel in that covenant and call them back to it when they became faithless [Haggai 1:1, 3; 2:1, 5, 10, 20; Zechariah 1:1, 7; 4:6, 8; 6: 9; 7:1, 4, 8; 8:1, 18-19; 11:11].

A great deal of what they say is tough trenchant rebuke addressed to a faithless people—already fully apostate or heading that way. Sometimes their words are almost brutal and their topic, when it is about the future, is about the future in light of the current behavior of God's chosen people. The prophetic critique of the nation often centers in the abuse of

power which is another way to show contempt of the Holy One. See Proverbs 14:31; 17:5; 22:22-23; Isaiah 1:21-23.

Heschel again about a prophet, "Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming...he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world was a slum. They make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects. What if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich? So what if some old woman found pleasure and edification in worshiping 'the Queen of Heaven'? Why such immoderate excitement? Why such intense indignation?" [Ibid. page 3]

Though there's plenty of that sort of speech it's never addressed to people whose hearts are turned toward God. All Israelites were sinners but not all Israelites betrayed God and sold themselves to idols; there were many in each generation who remained faithful to the covenant. God spoke comfort and assurance and praise to people like that and that's one of the reasons we find rebuke and assurance sitting side by side in one context. See Isaiah 3:8-11 and numerous texts like that.

It was because so much was at stake that we find the marked severity of the language of rebuke. The nation was truly ill and strong medicine was needed if there was to be a cure. But certainly the perversion and rejection of the glorious God and his gospel was fundamental in shaping prophetic thunderings [Psalm 106:20-21].

It's the richness of gospel truth that shows how mean and shabby and perverse treachery and heresy are. The gentler, the more patient and devoted the wife or husband is the more shocked we are by marital treachery and the more clearly we see how cheap it is. **It's only the glory of the gospel that makes the heresy worth talking about.** If there's nothing at stake who cares about divergent opinions and philosophies and much less who's going to be filled with rage? **And who is going to be willing to give away his or her life in glorious self-giving for something that matters hardly at all?**

Heresy drove Paul close to unbridled emotion in Galatians because he recognized that it denied the cosmic beauty, the cosmic power, the cosmic shift and uplift, the cosmic transformation and the new creation that had taken place in the incarnation and redemptive work of God and he damned the heresy and all who insisted on teaching it.

Do we think it was just a marked difference of opinion that led Paul to express this snarl [Galatians 5:12], "O that those who are upsetting you would get themselves castrated." [Moffat, who lets us hear the bluntness of the text.] This is the apostle who became "all things to all men that he might by all means save some." [1 Corinthians 9:22] What makes that heresy so repulsive to Paul that he would speak in such a savage denunciation?

The prophets weren't ignorant about what was going on in the political and military, social and economic world but that isn't what shaped their foundational message. It was their gospel that shaped their interpretation of what was happening in the world; it's the gospel from God and about God that's

embedded in the biblical witness that enables us to interpret life from a perspective beyond the facts though it is embedded in the facts. It was the gospel of the glorious God who sent them and the glory of the gospel he sent that drove the prophets careering into trouble when they confronted abuse by those in the corridors of power.

They came with a message from God that addressed the current situation. But what “God” was it they represented? That’s the subtext—God himself is the subtext and not the sound doctrine that is preached and taught about him.

But, there is no knowing the personal God if we do not have truth [doctrine] revealed about him. A God who doesn’t reveal himself is unknown to us and in that sense does nothing with/for/through us so truth about him is essential, indispensable. But God is greater than the truth we tell about him. Whatever else we do with truth we must keep our relationship with God and keep it personal! We don’t pray to theological truths or correct theological formulations and it isn’t our grasp of God that makes this entire enterprise called “living” worthwhile—it is God himself!

It was the awe-inspiring God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that sent Moses, armed with nothing but a stick, against the most powerful king in the world and all his troops. It was that God who wrecked the Egyptian empire and who ripped apart a sea that got in his way so that his people could go through it; it was *that* God that made a howling wilderness a home away from home for a nation until he brought the nation to the land he promised them.

It was that faithful God and his ways that strengthened the almost fearless Elijah against the most powerful woman on the planet [Jezebel, wife of Ahab], her entire prophetic school of Baal prophets and a kingdom that ran headlong to oblivion.

It was that magnificent God that took a timid teenager, called Jeremiah, who didn't want the job and made him, for all his timidity, into an iron pillar and a city with copper walls [chapter 1 in its entirety]. The very details of the call of that young man has gospel written all over it.

No wonder God in Jeremiah 2:5 wants to know, "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." Apostatize from *that* God? When prophets like Amos raged at religious and moral perversion it was because their underlying gospel inspired the rage.

We shouldn't be surprised then that while the prophets raged and rebuked, proclaimed doom and threats they also proclaimed assurance and hope on the grounds that God keeps his commitments even when people walk away from theirs. Whole chapters in the prophets are devoted to gospel and the gospel is proclaimed to unfaithful people. Here's the kind of thing I mean; a few out of many. I've paraphrased some of these excerpts. See the texts in some major version.

*"You who bring good tidings ["good news," "gospel"] to Zion, tell them this..."*

**Isaiah 40:1-9**

*"I turned my face away from you in wrath—for a mere moment—but I will be merciful to you with an everlasting kindness."*

**Isaiah 54:7-10; Psalm 30:5**

*"I will bring Israel up out of their graves."*

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

*"The days will come when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."*

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

*"Behold the days are coming...that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah...I will reject Israel when the sun and moon and stars disappear from the sky."*

**Jeremiah 33:14-28**

*"Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his plans. Let him return to the Lord and he will have mercy on him...For my plans are not your plans...For as the rain comes down...from heaven...and waters the earth and makes it bring forth...bread to the eater So shall my word [promise] go forth from my mouth; it shall not return unto me void but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it...You will go out with joy and be led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills will break into singing..."*

**Isaiah 55:7-13**

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your King is coming to you...He shall speak peace to the nations; His dominion shall be from sea to sea. And from the River to the ends of the earth."*

**Zechariah 9:9-10**

*"I will strengthen the house of Judah and I will save the house of Jacob [Israel]. I will bring them back. Because I have*



*mercy on them. They shall be as though I had not cast them aside; for I am the Lord their God.*

**Zechariah 10:6-7**

*“For the Lord is our Judge. The Lord is our Lawgiver. The Lord is our King. He will save us.”*

**Isaiah 33:22**

Once more, the prophets are saturated with harsh speech [and some of it is nothing like our “politically correct” speech of today—[see Ezekiel 23:11-21] but underneath and beyond savage denunciation of vicious and corrupt leaders and all who follow them they tell of a God who in their terms is like a worried father who walks the floor at night torn with emotion over his son [you must see Hosea 11:1-11]. The prophets tell of a God who finds no pleasure in the death even of those who insolently reject him [Ezekiel 18]. They tell of a God who shouts in frustration: “If they tell you I’ve abandoned Israel and reneged on my covenant they’re lying. I don’t care what they say or how things looks. If the moon and stars are still in the sky and the mountains are still standing you’ll know I haven’t abandoned sinful Israel.” [Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:28-21, 37-41; 33:19-26.]

The God they proclaim calls for obedience and righteousness and social justice that arises out of faith but he also exults in an opportunity to forgive sins [Micah 7:18-20], he longs for his people to be at peace with him in faithfulness because that’s where life is to be found and enjoyed and it is in such a relationship that Israel is a light-bringer to the nations.

God is not obsessed with Sin and Death—he is obsessed with life and all that that means for Israel and the nations.

Psalm 117 is a direct song to and for the nations and not Israel. Imagine a singer standing up in the assembly and singing the words of 117 while his brother and sister Jews listen on. [Note 1 Corinthians 14: It calls on all the nations to speak and sing praise to God and the reason for the call is made clear. "For" God is good to Israel. The psalmist is saying things about God and about God's goodness to Israel and he gives that as a reason that the nations should rejoice. If he cares about Israel he must care about the nations also. Israel is being set forth as an example of the kind of God Yahweh is and the implication is that the nations would do well to desert the gods they worship and turn to Yahweh.

# PART 2

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS 1—8

1. The people God brought back out of Babylon had not been faithful to him or to one another and God chose to chastise them and now speak to them and their leaders through Haggai and Zechariah.

2. In 1:1-6 he reminds the returnees that the disaster God brought on the nation was because it had been covenantly unfaithful and ignored the prophets sent to it. They were like their fathers whose behavior led in the first place to the Babylonian captivity.

3. 1:7-17 takes them back to the time when they were in captivity to Babylon and God—God alone—brought them home.

4. 1:18-21 makes the point that while Israel's suffering under foreign nations was God's chastisement the foreign nations were serving their own ends and acted oppressively. God stresses his sovereignty over them all and brings them down in response to their oppression. So not only does God judge his own people he also judges foreign nations for their iniquity. [When God gives power to nations it is not that the conquerors might oppress the captives but that they might cater to them.]

5. 2:1-5 assures the troubled People that a glorious future lies ahead and they are to picture the still ruined city as glorified, secure and prospering. The ground for their

assurance is God himself who will the glory at the heart of Jerusalem and the fiery wall around it.

**6.** 2:6-13 stresses that the current work of restoration is only the beginning. On the basis of the coming glory of Jerusalem God calls Jews who have been scattered throughout the world to make their way back home. In light of that glory people from foreign nations will join them and become part of the People of God.

**7.** 3:1-10 vindicates Joshua the High Priest as indeed a leader and representative of this restored community. The High Priest bore the nation's sin for them and carried the twelve tribes on his heart (think of the twelve stones on his breastplate). Joshua, clothed in filthy garments and accused by the Satan as unworthy, is chosen and cleansed by God and so the People's sin is dealt with and their place as God's chosen People is assured.

**8.** 4:1-13 in light of the previous vision vindicates the restored People as indeed God's light to the still scattered of Israel and to the foreign nations—they are God's Menorah (the candlestick) and they have two leaders anointed by God and through whom the Spirit of God flows to sustain the light. As Joshua had been vindicated in chapter 3 Zerubbabel is now vindicated in this section.

**9.** 5:1-11 has two visions that should be seen as immediately linked. The sins of God's people are made plain for all to see because they're written on a huge flying scroll—30 feet long and 15 feet wide. Then the following vision has a woman in a measuring basket. She represents all the sin of the entire land and two winged women carry her away to Babylon. Robbery and injustice do not belong in Zion or in the Promised Land—Babylon is the true home of such evil and that is where it is carried. As such evils would rot the

structures of any home in the Promised Land so they will rot the structures in Babylon. So evil is to leave the land of promise and the exiles are to be done with Babylon.

**10.** 6:1-8 has the chariots of God coming out of the gate of God's residence. They travel throughout the earth stamping God's sovereignty everywhere they go.

**11.** 6:9-15 announces the uniting of the two branches of chapter 4 into one Branch. The High Priest is crowned and reigns on his throne while God calls the people to "Behold the man whose name is THE BRANCH." (Haggai 2:5-8, identifies the current temple with Solomon's temple and with the future glorification of that temple.)

**12.** 7:1—8:23 calls for an end to lamenting former losses which came as a result of flagrant and continuous disobedience. It calls for heartfelt allegiance to God who loves and has chosen Zion and it speaks of coming glory and joy under the hand of God.

### **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 1-8**

1. Remember & Return to Me: 1:1-6
2. The Man among the Myrtle Trees: 1:7-17:
3. Four Horns and Four Craftsman: 1:18-21
4. The Young Man and the Measuring Line: 2:1-13
5. High Priest, Satan & Assurance: 3:1-10
6. Lampstands, Olive Trees & Temple: 4:1-14
7. The Flying Scroll: 5:1-4
8. Woman in Measuring Basket: 5:5-11
9. Chariots of God: 6:1-8
10. Joshua & the Branch: 6:9-15
11. Fasting and Faithfulness: 7:1 - 14
12. Words of Assurance and Hope 8:1-23

## **COMMENTS ON ZECHARIAH 1—8**

### **REMEMBER & RETURN TO ME**

*Zechariah 1:1-6:*

The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Return to me,” declares the Lord Almighty, “and I will return to you.” (Zechariah 1:3)

By these words the repatriated community is forced to look back at the Babylonian exile. During those years the temple and the city were ruined and the land suffered the consequences of desolation. It’s now nearly twenty years since Cyrus gave them permission to go home and the situation in their homeland had hardly changed and that was because the people had hardly changed. Haggai makes that startlingly clear. The people and the land were, so to speak, still suffering the exile because the people in Haggai and Zechariah’s day were their forefathers reborn.

We love to tell the truth that God just won’t let us go. He isn’t prepared to let us sink without trace. Despite our rebellion and gross willfulness, despite our yawning and stretching when our souls should be tense with the effort and strain of confronting the world in God’s name for the sake of the vulnerable and the oppressed; despite all that, here he comes again to get us out of the bog we’re sinking into. We love to tell that truth. And why wouldn’t we? Isn’t that worth telling? Absolutely!

It’s right and vital that we stress this truth: God came in and as Jesus to rescue us! Not to damn us—because we didn’t

need his help with that; we had done a perfect job of that all by ourselves. He came not to condemn us but to save us, to give us life (John 3:16-17). But the life he offers is life with Him and life with Him isn't possible while we exult in our evil and hold him and the human family he loves in contempt. That'd be like our claiming to be friends with someone we rejoice in abusing, someone we view with contempt and don't mind showing it.

Life with him as his chosen People isn't just about us, it's about his purpose for the entire human family. God doesn't make pets of his People and his People are chosen not only that they might have life with God but also that the world might receive light and life with him! To despise their mission in the world is to deny their reason to be God's elect People.

We're not keen on saying that God can be very angry with us and that he wants us to return to him if we want him to return to us. He'll walk away! Yes, yes, we know he doesn't ultimately abandon us—here is no loveless anger with God—but something happens when we set our faces resolutely against God. It isn't a change in God's loving commitment to us for that remains changeless; but God responds to us differently when we're bent on dishonoring him, despising his purpose and holding him in contempt. His love takes a different road. The prodigal's father loved the boy while he was in the pigpen but the father saw him as “dead” and “lost” while he was there.

It helps no one when we give the impression that God is an “amoral loving machine” as one of our critics called him. Nothing seems to make him angry [that is, lovingly opposed to us], he'll put up with anything and still stand around, cap in

hand, with that sickening and indulgent smile on his too tolerant face, hoping we'll catch ourselves on and start behaving. That's how one of our critics saw God in light of so much evangelical writing and preaching. That ceaseless saccharin pap makes you want to throw up. It didn't sit well with Jonah.

The New Testament never expressly says that God is reconciled to us (always that God reconciles us to himself) but the idea is there. The death of Christ made it possible for God to relate to us differently. There was something in us (sin) that made the cross of Christ necessary but there was something in God also (holiness) that made God go to the cross as Jesus Christ so that he could offer us a righteous forgiveness. He appears to think there is something that must be forgiven! There's a "dark line" in the face of God; an anger against sin and a relentless love that will uproot it no matter what it takes. Someone told George Arthur Buttrick that they thought famines and wars and natural catastrophes were proof that God didn't exist. Buttrick suggested that maybe they were God's footprints walking away from us to get our attention.

Return to me and I will return to you, said the Lord Almighty. Maybe we need to quit whimpering and start limping our way back to God and he will return to us.



## ***THE MAN AMONG THE MYRTLE TREES***

*Zechariah 1:7-17*

### *The characters in the vision*

This vision is seen in the same night and there seems to be a lot going on in it and its “business” makes it a bit difficult to hold it together. Let me list the characters included in the vision.

There’s the prophet

There’s the guiding angel who interprets for the prophet

There’s a rider on a red horse

There are more (riders on) variously colored horses

There’s the Angel of the Lord

There’s the Lord Almighty

### *The storyline of the vision*

This vision is seen in the night the prophet sees a man riding a red horse (1:8) in a ravine and among evergreen myrtle trees (bushes). (2) Behind him are other horses of various colors and perhaps with riders—we aren't told they had riders but since they were sent to reconnoiter and since they report back as “we” (1:10-11) we’re probably supposed to think of riders and of the first rider as the spokesman for the group.

Without introduction we're told that Zechariah has an angel guide who gets the answer to the prophet’s question and passes on instruction (1:9, 14). The prophet wants to know who these riders are and the angel allows him to hear from the 1st rider (1:10) and to see them as they report to the Angel of

the Lord who is also among the myrtle trees (1:11). They tell the Angel of the Lord that they have completed their mission and found “the whole world at rest and at peace” (1:11).

Then the prophet hears the Angel of the Lord ask the Almighty how long he was going to withhold mercy from Jerusalem and the Judean area (1:12).

When the Angel of the Lord speaks to the Almighty the Almighty then speaks comforting words to the angel who is acting as Zechariah's guide (1:13).

Zechariah's angel companion then commissions the prophet to speak assurance concerning Jerusalem and the Judean townships (1:14-17).

### *The significance of the vision*

Right or wrong, I take the view that the vision describes Judah's situation while in Babylonian captivity and prior to the 539 release under Cyrus! (3)

This altogether affects how one should understand the vision. It's clear one of the aims of the vision is to comfort the people to whom Zechariah speaks years after the end of the Exile. (4) So how does that work?

Assume for the moment that this is the case—that is, that the vision received in 520 sees them as back in the Exile. What is it that God wants them to hear? He wants them to hear several related truths.

1. He wants the current community to remember that Israel's/Judah's captivity in Babylon was triggered by their rejection of God and their refusal to hear the words of the earlier (“former”) prophets. Read again 1:1-6.

2. He wants them to hear the prophets who now speak to them. Both in compassion and in a demand for justice he sent prophets (Jeremiah 7.25; 2 Chronicles 36:15) and they were to bear in mind that what happened before could happen again.

3. He wants them to know that what he promised during Exile he has fulfilled.

4. Their return from Exile was not accomplished by the warring nations for in their wars they cared nothing for Israel.

5. Their being home was the work of the God of hosts who alone had Israel's blessing in mind.

6. Their being home is an expression of God's gracious faithfulness to a nation whose national history was one of recurring apostasy.

Bear in mind that Haggai's description of the community is not much different from the larger community (Judah) that was taken into Exile. The bodies of the repatriated people of Israel may have enjoyed political freedom but their hearts had not yet experienced that freedom which would have expressed itself in true service to God in formal corporate worship and worship that expressed itself in daily covenant love among one another.

Since the vision concludes with comforting words from the Lord God who is jealous over Jerusalem/Zion we should take that as its central thrust (1:13-17). So the vision says that the seventy-year night of exile and humiliation (1:13) was at an end and the future was to be glorious and prosperous.

Since the vision is dated November 520 BC (1:7) and since the seventy years ended about nineteen years earlier (something like 539, at Cyrus' decree—see Ezra 1:1-4) this means the vision describes a period and circumstances already past.

What would be the point of giving such a vision?

The vision assures the people that their being at Jerusalem and in Judea at this time was no accident, nor was it a mistake. This opening night vision gives us insight into what (so to speak) was going on in the heavenly realm that led to the restoration of the Jewish people to Jerusalem. When this vision is done, the prophet could stand before the people and say, “I have been assured in a vision that we didn't arrive here by accident or by mistake. We are here—however disappointing it all seems at present—because God brought our night of exile to an end because he loves Jerusalem. And you need to know that it wasn't that Persia cared for us that she made war against Babylon. It was God indeed who sent us into Exile in light of our persistent evil but Babylon engaged in ‘overkill’ and treated us with undue cruelty. (Isaiah 14:6; 47:5-7). It was God who saw us in our sin and in our agony and saw that no one was coming to our aid (Isaiah 59:15b-21; 63:1-6).”

If what I'm suggesting is true, this vision is telling the Jews how it was they ended up back home.

*Concluding remarks on the text*

This night vision is dated 520 and that means it's something like eighty-five years after Nebuchadnezzar first came against Jerusalem and took Jews off into Babylonian captivity.

The evergreen myrtle tree (1:8, 10, 11) is included in Isaiah 41:19 and 55:13 as a sign that Israel's blessedness is indeed the work of God (see the context).

The lead rider in 1:10 explains that the horses (and I presume riders) have been given the job to scout the world to see if anything is going on that would suggest a shift in political power that luckily might lead to Israel's return home.

Bear in mind that the vision is dealing with the period that precedes the end of the Jewish exile!

The riders return and report to the Angel of the Lord that they see nothing going of that nature. We're being told that Israel's hope for the future isn't determined by the political or military state of the nations (1:11).

Nevertheless, though the future of the Jews depends on the will and work of God it isn't carried out in a vacuum so the news the riders bring to the Angel of the Lord isn't good news. The Angel intercedes for Israel with a "how long?" appeal and God speaks to Zechariah's guide (1:12-13).

The message given to Zechariah is that God has not forgotten Jerusalem and that he intends to choose it again and rebuild his temple there and the time is coming when they would see builders with their measuring lines and equipment at work in the desolated city. Judean towns would again flourish and the sanctuary of Jerusalem (Zion) would be his place of dwelling again (1:14-17).

All this he would do because he loves Jerusalem and what it stands for! In addition, he would do this for the Jews because he was angry with the enemy (Babylon). Although he had been angry at Israel, their enemy had come after Israel

heartlessly (1:15 and compare 2 Chronicles 28:6-10 and Isaiah 47:5-6, Amos 1:3, 11 on the matter of “overkill”).

Zechariah 1—8 (2)