

ZECHARIAH: YOU RETURN TO ME,... I'LL RETURN TO YOU!

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Zechariah has been called the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. Like the book of Revelation, Zechariah is a book of prophecy. Its theme is to set forth the program of God, which is also the theme of the book of Revelation. The difference is that in Zechariah Israel is in the foreground and the Gentile nations in the background, while in the book of Revelation the Gentile nations are in the foreground and the continuous thread that ties them together is the nation of Israel.

The first verse of Zechariah reveals in a very interesting way this focus on the nation Israel:

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, the prophet, {Zech 1:1a RSV}

We usually read through these opening verses without thinking of them as having much significance, but remember that Hebrew names mean something. The most outstanding example perhaps of the significance of Hebrew names is Methuselah, the name of the oldest man who ever lived. His name means "when he dies it will come" -- and when he died, the flood came, just as that name prophesied.

Here, we have three names that are very significant. Zechariah means "God remembers" and Berechiah, his father's name, means "God blesses" and his grandfather's name Iddo, means "At the appointed time." That is the theme of the book of Zechariah. It is a book of encouragement to the people of Israel.

Zechariah was a contemporary with Haggai, one of the prophets who ministered to the remnant who had returned from captivity in Babylon. Although they were back in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple and the city, they were still vassals of Babylon, still subject to the Gentile nations around them, without much hope for the future. It was a discouraging, depressing time, and a spirit of dark pessimism gripped these people. And Zechariah comes to them in the midst of their depression, with this announcement that is even wrapped up in his name and ancestry: Jehovah blesses, Jehovah remembers at the appointed time. What an encouragement those names must have been.

At the beginning of the first chapter there is a brief outline of the book. This is often true of the Bible, and if you look for these little outlines, you can often find a brief summary of the message of the book in the opening sections. Here it is broken up in a dramatic way by the name of God, the Jehovah of hosts. It is one of the unusual names of God. Jehovah of hosts, that is, the God of the masses -- the God of all the armies, whether they be angel armies, human armies, demonic armies, makes no difference. The stars are also called the hosts. This is the God who is sovereign over all the masses, whoever they may be. And this name is repeated three times (verses 2-3):

"The LORD [Jehovah] was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord [Jehovah] 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 RSV}

Three times that name is repeated. What is said before each of those repetitions marks the divisions of this book. It falls into three brief sections. The first one is included in,

"The Lord was very angry with your fathers." {Zech 1:2 RSV}

That marks the first division, comprising just the first six verses which describe God's displeasure with his people. Then we have,

"Return to me." {Zech 1:3b RSV}

And that marks the second division, covering from chapter 1, verse 7, clear over to chapter 6, verse 15, speaking of God's deliverance of his people. Then, chapters 7 through 14 make up the third division which is an exposition of these words:

"and I will return to you, says the Lord." {Zech 1:3d RSV}

That is always God's way. If you find yourself straying away from his presence and as a result, your life grows cold, your faith grows dim, you grow discouraged, you are defeated, you find yourself exposed to all types of temptations and prey to every evil thought, what must you do? "Return to me," says the Lord, "and I will return to you." If you want God back in your life, with all the glory of his presence, then come back to him. That is always the formula.

As I have indicated, the first six verses are just a brief resume of God's quarrel with his people, the fact that they are displeased him, as we have seen all through the Old Testament. There is no need to dwell upon this. God is always displeased when his people turn from him, whether we are looking at God's people of Israel or God's people of the church.

Then, beginning with verse seven, a most remarkable vision was given to the prophet. A vision that is divided up into a series of eight, which were all given to Zechariah on the same night, and these also fall into major divisions. These three divisions are like three acts in a great drama that was revealed to the prophet. You might think of them as God's "First Nighter Program," because they all came on one night to the prophet. As we read them, we can imagine we have been invited to attend this drama that God is unfolding to the prophet. God is the author, Zechariah is the producer, and we are the audience.

The vision covers all the time from Zechariah's day through the present, clear on to the coming of the Lord. The first act is made up of two visions. One is a vision of a watcher looking out over the people in the valley. The watcher is riding upon a horse and with him are gathered other riders upon horses. And the angel of the Lord interprets the vision to the prophet. The meaning of this is simply that Israel was that people down in the valley, symbolized here for us by the lowly myrtle shrub, and they could see that they were in a shadowed place. It was a time of despair and difficult days. But what they could not see -- what the prophet was revealing to them -- was this unseen one who was watching the whole procedure and saw what was going on and had with him the great resources to meet their need in the hour of despair.

Now the second vision in the first act speaks of four smiths, or workmen -- actually, carpenters. It was a vision of four horns and four smiths. This is also interpreted to the prophet. He sees that like the riders in the vision before, these are divine agents, angels perhaps, who are sent out to terrify the nations. So we see that this is a picture of the desperate need of Israel to return to God. Israel was discouraged at the display of the powers and forces in opposition against them. But what they did not see was the resources. They were unconscious of the divine agents that were there to move on their behalf and that is what God revealed to them.

So the curtain falls at the end of Act One, and in the second chapter it rises on Act Two, which is one single vision. It is a vision of a man with a measuring line in his hand who went out to measure the city of Jerusalem and as he did this, the interpreting angel said to the prophet (verses 4-5):

"... 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of men and cattle in it. For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the Lord, and I will be the glory within her.'" {Zech 2:4b-5 RSV}

This is followed by a beautiful description of the days of blessing that are to come upon Israel, all to be literally fulfilled as Israel would be brought some day back into the place of blessing in the land of Israel.

This is the picture of God's promise to those who return. It is always one of blessing. Come back, and blessing flows from that act of return, for God is the center of blessing. Blessing can come from no other source. If your life is empty, you need God. If you are a Christian and your life is empty, you need to return to God. It is out of the resources of God that blessings come. The man with a measuring line is simply a very descriptive symbol of the unlimited, measureless blessing that God is ready to pour out into the life of one who

comes back into a relationship with him.

Act Three now opens with five more visions. Here is the way to return to God, acted out for you in these five visions. In the first scene, Joshua the high priest is revealed, standing before God. Opposed to Joshua is Satan, the adversary. Now the people could see the adversary. They knew that Satan was against them. But what they could not see was the advocate, the one who stood on their behalf and who ministered for them. Then we see, in this wonderfully moving vision, how Joshua is cleansed; his filthy garments are taken off and he is clad in new, clean garments and the statement is made that God would do this simply because he chose to do so. "I have chosen Jerusalem," he says, just as he says of us. Why does he bless us? Because he has chosen to do so.

Then in the latter part of this chapter 3 is a wonderful vision that looks forward to the work of Christ upon the cross (verse 8):

"Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day." {Zech 3:8-9 RSV}

This is a marvelous prophecy of the coming of the one who would be Jehovah's servant, the Branch. One who would have the marks of the crucifixion and who would be the instrument by which the guilt of the land was removed in a single day. And in that day blessing would flow out as God's manifestation of his right to cleanse the sinner without charging him, accusing him, or condemning him. Cleansing is the first step in the way back.

Then in Scene Two we see what follows the cleansing of God -- the power of the Holy Spirit -- in the vision of the lampstand and the olive tree. It pictures the Spirit-filled life. Oil always refers to the Holy Spirit, and here were olive trees continually dripping oil out of their branches into a lampstand, and it was burning brightly. What wonderful symbolism of the fact that the Lord within us is constantly supplying that inner strengthening that makes it possible for us to burn brightly as light in the midst of a dark generation.

Scene Three opens on a flying scroll, a gigantic scroll with scriptures written on both sides, and with curses against the thieves and the blasphemers among the people. It pictures the judgment of Israel, the going forth of the law in the midst of corruption. Now they could see the corruption but they could not see the law. So this is God's encouragement in the hour of darkness when all they could see was corruption, and everything going to pieces. What they could not see was God's agency working to bring a curse upon that lawlessness to bring it to an end.

Then, in Scene Four, Zechariah sees a woman in an ephah. An ephah is like a big bushel basket, and while the prophet and the angel watched, wings were given to this basket and it flew away to the land of Babylon. What does this strange thing mean? If you had a vision like that you would wonder what you had been eating the night before! But the prophet knows that a meaningful vision has been given to him. As he meditates upon it, he can understand it because it contains terms that are used elsewhere in the Scripture. Whenever a woman appears symbolically in Scripture, there is always reference to something wrong in the realm of religion. (I did not invent that, the Scriptures did.) Here, then, is the picture of the judgment of the false faith, the false church, very much as we find in the book of Revelation where a woman who is the false church is called Babylon the great. Zechariah sees the same thing; God's judgment upon hypocritical religion, false faith.

Then in the final scene, the prophet sees the four chariots which rode out upon the earth, very much like the vision in Revelation of the four horsemen who ride and bring judgment upon the world. The curtain rings down, then, on this great drama of redemption of the future. It is God's great symbolic play of the way back to him -- first by cleansing, then by the filling of the Holy Spirit, then the putting away of evil in its various forms and finally the judgment of the entire earth as God brings the evil of men to the seat of judgment.

Chapter 7 marks a new division in the book and in this chapter we find God speaking in a different way.

Instead of using visions, he speaks to the prophet in a direct address. The heart of this section is the prophet's announcement in chapter 8, verse 3:

"Thus says the LORD: I will return 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." {Zech 8:3 RSV}

Here is a picture of God dwelling in the midst of his people. One day this is going to be fulfilled on the earth. In the land of Israel, what has been predicted is taking place, one startling event after another. The return of Jerusalem to Jewish control has prepared the way for the rebuilding of the temple on its old site. Scripture has long predicted that this would be one of the opening signs that God was about to move again to restore Israel at last to its place among the nations.

So we can read this section with great interest because it pictures something that is historically coming to pass, but we can read it with even greater interest because of what is spiritually symbolized in our own lives -- God in the midst of us. What will the result be? God dwelling in us, renewing the inner man, a fountain of blessing pouring out in our lives, making us fruitful and effective and a blessing to all with whom we come in contact. That is the picture of these last scenes.

Chapters 7 and 8 link together in a plea of God to the people to be honest and open before him. It is again a rehearsal of their failures in his sight and then a reminder that while he is unailing in his mercy and grace, he is unchanging in his standards. He always supplies what is necessary but he never lowers the standards. The people react as people often do, in these three ways; first (chapter 7, verse 11):

But they refused to hearken, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears that they might not hear. {Zech 7:11 RSV}

That is always the first step. They pretend not to hear. And then (verse 12):

They made their hearts like adamant led they should hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. {Zech 7:12a RSV}

They deliberately disobeyed, and then finally, they began to play the hypocrite. The chapter opens with a question of the people, "Shall we keep on with these feasts that we began in Babylon?" And God's word to them is, "Why are you doing it? Are you celebrating these feasts because you mean to worship, or simply for a religious show?"

These are some of the very ways that we avoid the will of God today. I remember years ago, one of my daughters was told by her mother to put on a green dress. It was interesting to watch her. She pretended at first not to hear. Then after her mother repeated the request several times, she openly rebelled and just said, "No. I don't want to wear that dress." And then, when it looked as though she would have to wear it, she came up to her mother and said, "Mother, I want to wear the green dress, but it is just too dirty," which was not true at all. In other words, she followed exactly the program that is outlined here. She pretended not to hear, she directly disobeyed, and then she played the hypocrite, and pretended that it was right and proper that she should disobey in this way. How accurately this catches up the inherent deceitful tendencies of the human heart!

But now God goes on to point out that the result will be a blindness to truth; that ultimately, they will lose the ability to see and hear. This is set forth for us in chapters 9 and 10 -- the picture of the blindness of the people, and right in the midst of this, you have the first of several amazingly accurate glimpses of the coming of the Messiah (chapter 9, verse 9):

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass. {Zech 9:9 RSV}**

And you recall how those words were literally fulfilled in the New Testament when our Lord sent his disciples to find a colt and an ass and he mounted the ass and rode in triumph in the streets of Jerusalem with the people going before and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 21:9) Exactly and unconsciously fulfilling this prophecy of Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious," and you will know him because he is riding on an ass accompanied with a colt.

And yet, they did not know him and they did not recognize him when he came even in such a remarkable way. And as he drew near to Jerusalem, he wept as he looked out over the impenitent city and he said these remarkable words, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes." (Luke 19:42) That is what happens when God moves in your life and you do not listen; you lose the ability to hear, and these things are hid from your eyes. And the judgment of blindness came upon these people.

In chapter 11, after many rebuffs, the Messiah, again speaking through the prophet, says these amazing words (verse 12):

Then I said to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. {Zech 11:12 RSV}

How much did Judas contract for in betraying our Lord? Thirty shekels of silver. According to the law if a slave was gored by an ox, the man who owned the ox could settle the whole matter by paying his neighbor thirty shekels of silver. Here the Messiah says to these people, "All right now, look if you want me, say so, but if you do not, give me my wages. What do you think I am worth to you?" And they weighed out for his price thirty shekels of silver.

Then comes the second result of an unrepentant heart and life (chapter 11, verses 15-17):

**Then the LORD said to me, "Take once more the implement of a worthless shepherd. For lo, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the sound, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs.
Woe to my worthless shepherd,
who deserts the flock!
May the sword smite his arm
and his right eye!
Let his arm be wholly withered,
his right eye utterly blinded!" {Zech 11:15-17 RSV}**

In other words, if you refuse the true shepherd, God will allow you to have a false shepherd. Again it was the Lord Jesus who said to the Pharisees, the blinded Pharisees of his day, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive." (John 5:43) This is that character whom Paul tells us about in Thessalonians called the man of lawlessness who comes to Israel as their deliverer and is received as the Messiah, but turns out to be the anti-Messiah, what we know as the anti-Christ, the false shepherd who comes when they reject and refuse the truth. (2 Th 2:3 ff)

I have often wondered at the number of people who fall into anti-Christian cults that abound today. Why is it? Time after time I have found that they have done so because they have rejected some opportunity to hear the truth, and the result is that they fall into the clutches of what sounds like truth but is a lie. As Paul says, "God sends upon them a strong delusion to make them believe what is false...who did not believe the truth." (2 Th 2:11)

Then we come to the last section, chapters 12 through 14, where we have this beautiful picture of God finding a way to come back into the lives of his people. It opens with these words (chapter 12, verses 2, 3):

"Lo, I am about to make Jerusalem a cop of reeling to all the peoples round about; It will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem. On that day I will make

Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will come together against it." {Zech 12:2-3 RSV}

According to the Scriptures, the darkest days for Jerusalem lie yet ahead. It shall become a burden to the nations, a grievous stone of stumbling, the prophetic scriptures say. The peoples of the nations shall be gathered together about the city and Zechariah tells us that God will not allow himself to be ignored. He vows that he will break through into human consciousness and it will come about this way (verses 9, 10):

"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 compassion and supplication, so that, when they look 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." {Zech12:9-10 RSV}

Isn't that amazing? Israel in its blindness refusing its Messiah refusing to recognize the one that God sent, never realizing that the one whom they pierced is coming again And when he comes. he will speak these words (chapter 13 verse 6):

"And if one asks him, 'What are these wounds on your back?'" [or, as other versions say, "in your hands"] "He will say, 'The wounds I received in the house of my friends.'"

This ties in with the vivid, descriptive sequence in chapter 14 (verses 1-4):

Behold, a day of the LORD is coming, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in the midst of you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women ravished; half of the city shall go into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives... {Zech 14:1-4a RSV}

You remember that was the place that Jesus stood on this earth He went out with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and as they watched him he was taken up out of their sight into the heavens and an angel standing there said to them, This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven " (Acts 1:11).

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. And the valley of my mountains shall be stopped up, for the valley of the mountains shall touch the sides of it; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. {Zech 14:4-5a RSV}

Geologists have long known that one of the greatest faults in the earth's surface runs right through the Mount of Olives. The mountain shall be split in half, and then what? Well, when Israel has seen its Messiah and mourned for the one whom it pierced and has recognized with great mourning that it had turned its back upon the one sent of God, then we read (chapter 14, verses 8,9):

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea; it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one. {Zech 14:8-9 RSV}

This is picturing the glory of the earth in the days when God shall reign through his Son as king.

The book closes then with these beautiful words (verse 20, 21):

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the LORD."

And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day. {Zech 14:20-21 RSV}

Every commonplace thing is made to be holy unto the Lord. Do you know that that is what God is promising to you? Every moment of your life, every commonplace thing is touched with the glory of his presence when he is in the center of your life. It will be visibly true on the earth someday. It can be spiritually true right now.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, we thank you for the beauty of this vision and for the truth of it. We know that you are forever reminding us that your word is true. How foolish it is that we should ever turn from it or cast it aside or be indifferent to it or act as though it were of little importance. Lord teach us to examine ourselves and to walk in earnestness and honesty before you and to realize that all this is designed so that we may come into the understanding and the experience of a time of glory within such as we have never know before. Make these words to be the experience of each of us as we learn to walk before you our living God, and to know what it means to have the glory of the Lord within. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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