

High Hopes

by Steve Zeisler

My daughter's parakeet died last week, and I was the one who discovered it. My first thought was to replace the parakeet with an identical one so she would not know that hers had died. I wondered if an eight-- year-- old ought to be protected from such problems, protected from sorrow and loss, and the consideration of death. I decided, however, that that would not be wise; she needed to be helped through that situation rather than protected from it.

It occurs to me that Christian ministers are frequently accused of taking such an approach to problems. Some say that the business of preachers and ministers is to hide the truth from people, to cover over sorrow, to sugar-- coat the harsh realities of life. On the contrary, however, the fact is that in order to be able to preach and to minister to others preachers themselves need answers to these realities. They need convictions that will stand the test of suffering, injustice, and all the hardships that human beings are faced with. If the things we believe in our heart of hearts do not answer those questions, the preaching and ministering is foolishness and hypocrisy.

Zechariah was an Old Testament preacher. In 520 B.C. he was called to minister to the people of Israel, to speak God's words in that difficult time for the people of God; a time when they were under the control of an evil empire, when they faced danger, when they were small, restricted and beaten. Zechariah himself needed to believe that the truth of God effectively answered the questions that were being asked about injustice, suffering and death.

Let me outline what we will be studying in the next few weeks. This book of Zechariah is divided into two parts, and the first division, chapters I through 8, are the chapters that we will look at in this series. (We will not go on to consider chapters 9 through 14 for a number of reasons. Time is one, and another is the fact that Ray Stedman is preaching at our evening services about many of the events that are covered in chapters 9 through 14.) In chapters 1 through 8 we will, however, be looking at a series of eight visions that Zechariah had, primarily to enable him to minister to the people of his day. The first three visions, which we will look at today, were mainly for the benefit of Zechariah himself; next there comes a vision for a man named Joshua, the high priest of the day; there follows another vision that was primarily for a man named Zerubbabel, who was the political leader of his day; then there follows three further visions that were primarily for a delegation of newly returned exiles from Babylon (introduced in the tenth verse of chapter 6). The last section, chapters 7 and 8, is a discussion that is primarily for another delegation that came to question Zechariah (introduced in verse 2 of chapter 7). The visions and pronouncements made throughout this section cover all of human history, but they were spoken to strengthen individuals who were in Zechariah's audience as he spoke.

This morning we will begin by looking at the visions that God gave this prophet to set him on his feet, to encourage him that what he would say from then on would be true and effective. Zechariah 1:7-17:

On the twenty-- fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, as follows: I saw at night, and behold, a man was riding on a red horse, and he was standing among the myrtle trees which were in the ravine, with red, sorrel, and white horses behind him. Then I said, "My lord, what are these?" And the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "I will show you what these are." And the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered and said, "These are those whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth." So they answered the angel of the Lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, "We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is peaceful and quiet." Then the angel of the Lord answered and said, "O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which Thou hast been indignant these seventy years?" And the Lord answered the

angel who was speaking with me with gracious words, comforting words. So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "Proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster." 'Therefore, thus says the Lord, "I will return to Jerusalem with compassion; My house will be built in it," declares the Lord of hosts, "and a measuring line will be stretched over Jerusalem." ' Again, proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "My cities will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem." ' "

The first vision Zechariah had was of a prominent figure astride a red horse. This figure is identified in verse 12 as the remarkable person who shows up throughout the Old Testament under the title of "the angel of the Lord." This is no ordinary angel. "The angel of the Lord" is the pre-incarnate Messiah, Jesus Christ before his birth in Bethlehem, a spokesman for God to man. This angel is the dominant figure in these visions; whenever the angel of the Lord is present, he is the one who is in charge of the scene. Secondly, standing next to Zechariah is an individual whom he calls in verse 9 "the angel who was speaking with me." Throughout these visions this angel is an interpreter who guides Zechariah through the things he saw. Thirdly, this vision of horsemen includes a number of other angels, "Patrollers of the earth," angels who are sent out to monitor and guide the affairs of men.

The critical point of the vision is when the angel of the Lord asks, "O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah with which Thou hast been indignant these seventy years?" (verse 12). That is the question to which I was referring earlier: "God, why haven't you acted? What are you waiting for? Why is it that your servants, those to whom you are committed, are suffering, apparently abandoned by you, and you've done nothing to help them? Why is it that injustice continues and the cruel and violent nations of the earth remain at ease? Why is the world as it is? Why isn't suffering dealt with by God?" Listen to the words of another prophet, Habakkuk, who very brilliantly raises the same questions that the angel of the Lord raised on Zechariah's behalf. Habakkuk 1:1-4:

**The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.
How long, O Lord, will I call for help,
and Thou wilt not hear?
I cry out to Thee, "Violence!"
Yet Thou dost not save.
Why dost Thou make me see iniquity,
And cause me to look on wickedness?
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;
Strife exists and contention arises.
Therefore, the law is ignored
And Justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore, justice comes out perverted.**

Verse 13:

**Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor.
Why dost Thou look with favor
On those who deal treacherously?
Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallowed up
Those more righteous than they?**

Such is Habakkuk's impassioned plea. Then in chapter 2, verse 1, he says:

**I will stand on my guard post
And station myself on the rampart;
And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me...**

"How will God answer my predicament?" cries Habakkuk. If Habakkuk is going to be a prophet he has got to have answers to questions like that. He is saying, in effect, "How do I dare speak for the Lord to a needy people if I do not have answers for their predicaments. If what God says does not minister to the problem of injustice, and suffering and violence, the crushing of the righteous, the exaltation of the wicked, if my message does not answer those questions I cannot speak." Young Zechariah would never be able to speak either unless he somehow could be made to believe that what God says were answers in fact.

The same questions remain today. Why does a good man like Lech Walesa go to prison, the hopes he raised in the hearts of his people crushed, while violent dictators continue year after year? Why do wars, floods and disease do most damage to the poor and defenseless, the people who have already suffered the most in life? Why does the selfishness of parents hurt their children much more than themselves? Why are there no apparent answers for the plight of old people freezing in San Francisco, for prisoners rioting in New York, for the victims of bullies, predators and prejudiced fanatics, for those who are bent on their own destruction? "Why don't you do something, God?" That is the question the angel of the Lord asked. The visions given to Zechariah were give to him to answer those questions, because unless he believed there were answers he would never be able to preach.

The first vision, these horsemen of God, is an introduction to a subject that we ought to interpret briefly. Throughout the Scriptures there is a record given of the fact that spiritual forces in heavenly places are directing events on earth, the visible things that we see every day. In Ephesians 6 Paul talks about a war going on in heaven. He says that there, in the heavenlies, among invisible, spiritual forces is where the real battle is taking place; while the affairs of men on earth play out visibly the effects of that warfare. That is truth that the Lord brings to Zechariah at this point. God lets him see that the horsemen of God, the strong agents of our Father are abroad, monitoring and affecting the events that happen on earth. Things are not out of control. God has not lost track of what is going on.

Unfortunately the message they bring is disconcerting; and it is that message that elicits the cry of the angel of the Lord, who asks the question, "How long?" for Zechariah's benefit. What is disconcerting about the angel's report is this: evil is in the ascendancy, unjust rulers command great nations of earth, the people of God are small in number and defenseless, beset by enemies, poor; and the status remains quo. The violent rulers are not threatened at all; they rest secure. That is the report the horsemen bring: "We have patrolled the earth, and behold all the earth is peaceful and quiet."

After the angel of the Lord asks the question in verse 12, God answers. Notice that he answers directly to Zechariah because he is the one who needs to hear the answer:

So the angel who was speaking with me said to me, "Proclaim saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I am exceedingly Jealous for Jerusalem and Zion. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster." ' "

The first thing God says is that he recognizes that evil is going unpunished at that moment, but his anger is great and it remains undiminished on those who are cruel, violent and wicked, those who have "furthered disaster." So God is fully aware that justice is being perverted. Secondly, God says, "I will deal compassionately with my people. I have not forgotten my covenant. My servants with whom I have a love relationship will not be abandoned. I have plans to restore and honor my people."

Then Zechariah has two more visions to help him see in panorama the truth that the Lord has just stated. Verse 18:

Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, there were four horns. So I said to the angel who was speaking with me, "What are these?" And he answered me, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem." Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. And I said, "What are these coming to do?" And he said, "These are the horns which have scattered Judah, so that no man lifts up his head; but these craftsmen have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up their horns against the land of Judah in order to scatter it."

God is telling Zechariah in this vision how he will mete out justice for those who have acted wickedly and have apparently gotten away with it. In essence this vision is saying in picture form what Jesus would say near the end of his life, and that is that "those who take up the sword will die by the sword." That is the point of this vision.

The book of Daniel identifies horns as empires, as national entities. Daniel saw history summarized as four kingdoms, four empires succeeding one another. Zechariah sees these visions with the book of Daniel in his mind, and what he sees is a craftsman and a horn. Nebuchadnezzar was a craftsman, a brilliant leader who defeated Egypt and created an empire. That empire, Babylon, became a thrusting horn, a powerful upraised fist against the purpose of God. So God brought a craftsman who would terrify the horn, Cyrus the Persian, whose hordes defeated the empire of Babylon. Then the Persians became arrogant. They raised their horn against the purposes of God and God sent another craftsman, Alexander the Great, to topple the Persian empire. The Greeks then ruled an empire which in turn was toppled. Such has been the fate of every empire since. Every great tower raised to heaven, exalted in human pride, has been toppled by the next arrogant, proud warrior who exalts himself, only to be overthrown in turn. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. God metes out justice by stabbing in the back the one who himself is a backstabber. You may see the same cycle at work even in an arena as small as your office, where greedy, self-serving people appear to get ahead, only to be cut down later by the next greedy, self-serving individual who wants their spot. God does not allow injustice to go unpunished; that is the point of the vision of the horns. If Zechariah is going to be a preacher he needs to know that our Heavenly Father is a God of justice who will not allow wickedness and injustice to go on forever.

Then Zechariah sees another vision. Chapter 2:

Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a man with a measuring line in his hand. So I said, "Where are you going?" And he said to me, "To measure Jerusalem, to see how wide it is and how long it is." And behold, the angel who was speaking with me was going out, and another angel was coming out to meet him, and said to him, "Run, speak to that young man, saying, 'Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls, because of the multitude of men and cattle within it. For 1,' declares the Lord, 'will be a wall of fire around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.' "

Zechariah sees a man with a tape measure, going out to measure Jerusalem, presumably with the idea of seeing it built again, with walls erected around it. This man's actions allows for a declaration to be made: "wait. Jerusalem's future is not going to be decided by builders with tape measures. God has in mind a future for Jerusalem that is magnificent; a prosperous city filled with men and cattle, a city miraculously protected by a wall of fire called into existence by God and filled with the glory of God himself." If the vision of the horns was to picture how God deals with injustice, this vision is to display his acts of compassion for Jerusalem.

"What about the innocent people? What about the good people? What about those to whom God has committed himself in a love relationship who yet seem to be suffering? Will the Lord exalt his servants or not? Does he have in mind doing good for those people on whom he has placed his hand?" This vision and this announcement allow Zechariah to believe that our destiny, if we are followers of the Lord, however desperate the current situation may be, is to be honored, expanded, made prosperous, protected, filled with the glory of God. Seeing these truths and believing them gave Zechariah the courage to preach. The question raised by the angel in verse 12 of chapter 1 has an answer. What God has said is sufficient to encourage us to face a world that appears crazy, filled with suffering and violence.

You and I have the same problems. We will not be emboldened to preach, to speak up for the Lord's sake, to stride through open doors of witness that God gives us, to name his name in public if we do not believe that what he says are answers are answers in fact. If the questions of human suffering and injustice are in our thinking bigger than the gospel, then we will never speak up. Like Zechariah, we need to see the plan of God displayed in such a way that its truth is a sufficient answer to meet the real questions that face our generation. It is not good enough to be like a father who wants to replace a pet when it dies so his child will not have to find

out that pets die.

We cannot spend our life covering up and trying to pretend that problems do not exist. We have got to believe that the answers in Scripture are big enough. At the beginning of his ministry Isaiah was given a blinding vision of God. He fell on his face, frightened to death. But it was that vision of the power of God that gave Isaiah the courage to minister to his people. Ezekiel was given an awesome picture of God riding an angelic chariot. Because he saw God in his power and majesty he was enabled to stand on his feet and given courage to minister. Early in his call to be a preacher, Zechariah was given these visions to stand him on his feet so he would have the boldness to speak the truth.

The closing verses of chapter 2 are essentially the message that Zechariah gave. We have been talking about how the prophet was allowed to see things that gave him the courage to preach. It would be well for us to look at verses 6 through 13 of chapter 2 as the preacher, now on his feet before the assembled people of Jerusalem, has something to say. Here is the message he preached:

"Ho there! Flee from the land of the north," declares the Lord, "for I have dispersed you as the four winds of the heavens," declares the Lord. Ho, Zion! Escape, you who are living with the daughter of Babylon." For thus says the Lord of Hosts, "After glory He has sent me against the nations which plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of his eye. For behold, I will wave My hand over them, so that they will be plunder for their slaves. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me. Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst," declares the Lord. "And many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you. And the Lord will possess Judah as His portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for He is aroused from his holy

This was Zechariah's message for the people. Here were things they were to understand and do. Essentially it is a message about the coming of Christ. Twice we read the phrase, "Then they will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me," The "me" there is referring to Jesus Christ. That is part of what this message was about, an announcement of the coming of the Lord.

A useful way to look at the message which Zechariah preached is to look at the three commands around which the message centers. The first command is twice given, in different words. Verses 6 and 7: "Flee from the land of the north"; verse 7: "Escape, you who are living with the daughter of Babylon." Disentangle yourselves from the commitments you have to the world system. If you are still living in Babylon, if you have not yet returned to the land, if you are tied to it, if you are embracing the daughter of Babylon, cut yourself off; get away as fast as you can. That is the first command. The second command is in verse 10: "Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst"; while the third is: "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord" (verse 13).

The command to escape from commitments to the world system, to run away from the embrace of the daughter of Babylon, is one we would do well to heed. It is given in an interesting way. The thinking behind this command, the analysis that undergirds it, is unusual. Zechariah is saying that lordly Babylon, with its hanging gardens, with all its wealth, is a dangerous place to live. One is much better off fleeing to Jerusalem, which is unwallled and surrounded by enemies, suffering from a drought and about to be overcome at any moment. Jerusalem is a much safer place than Babylon. That sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Picture bow-- legged, bald-- headed Paul the apostle, going about the Roman Empire in the first century, striding into Athens and saying, "The wisdom of Greece, accumulated over centuries, extolled on every hand, is foolishness. You would do well to escape it and join me and my friends, this small band who worship the Jew who was crucified. It is too dangerous to rely on the wisdom of Greece. It is too dangerous to rely on the great established traditions of the Jews. It is too dangerous to trust the might of Rome. You are better off joining the Christians in the catacombs. It is safer down there." Remember Peter's message on the day of Pentecost. At the end of it he says, "Be saved from this perverse generation. Come join us in the church of Christ. Escape from this generation. Although it is likely to mean ostracism, jail, beatings and public

vilification, it is safer here." It remains true yet today that in the yoke of Christ there is safety, but it is dangerous to be embraced by the daughter of Babylon. James put it very succinctly. He said, "He who wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself the enemy of God. ' And the one enemy you do not want to have in all this universe is God. That is the most dangerous choice you can make. Run away, Zechariah is saying, because what is coming will mean that all that system will be overturned, and those who are now slaves will be masters someday. Come join us. Disentangle yourself from Babylon. That is the first command.

The second is, "Sing for joy." Christian joy is a most unaccountable, hard to argue with experience. People who derive their joy from something other than their circumstances are very difficult to explain; people who are filled with hope and delight, exuberance, verve and bounce, even when they are suffering, because of what God has said and what he has done inside them. "Sing for joy" is what Paul and Silas did in the jail at Philippi, even in the midst of an earthquake. The joy of faith, the joy of Christianity is what has arrested unbelievers in every age.

Notice that Zechariah adds, "And many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day" (verse 11). They will do so because they will be overcome by this indelible, unchangeable hope. In Revelation, John wrote,

"And I heard a voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling place of God is among men, and he shall dwell among them and they shall be his people and God himself shall be among them, and he shall wipe every tear from their eye and there shall no longer be any death, and there shall no longer be any mourning or crying or pain. The first things have passed away.' "

Zechariah says, "Sing for joy and be glad O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst." The dwelling place of God is among men. That ought to be a source of great joy to us.

The third command is given in verse 13: " Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for he is aroused from his holy habitation." The commands, "Sing for joy," and "Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord," are not antithetical. We derive our joy from the presence of God in our midst. We are overcome by silence, by respect and awe for God when we clearly see him for who he is and when we ponder the actions he has taken and will take. Our God is aroused from his habitation. He is standing up, he is on the point of action. That ought to strike us with a sense of respect and awe that does not allow for words. Be silent. God will act. His may be an act as terrible and unthinkable as crucifying his own Son. Imagine our God, aroused to act, visiting his judgment on sin, breaking his own heart to do it? What can you say? Be silent. God is aroused to act. He may end it all. This may be the point when human history will be done away with once and for all. We see God poised to act to end human history; what can we do but close our mouths and worship and respect him?

Zechariah was not a bad preacher once he was on his feet. Here were his main points: Flee from the entanglements of Babylon; sing for joy for the dwelling place of God is with men; be silent before the Lord for he is aroused for action. Zechariah ministered to his people because he had seen visions that communicated to him the answer to the anxious question, "Why doesn't God do more?" The answer enabled him to see the larger picture of the success of God in meting out justice, and to recognize that the future of God's people was one of prosperity and protection and glory. Having seen all those things Zechariah had something to say.

We can imagine ourselves in two places in this drama. We can imagine ourselves to be Zechariahs who are being made into spokesmen ourselves, who today and successively are being allowed to see things and believe things that will make us confident to speak; or we can imagine ourselves to be the recipient of his message, hearing the clear declaration that God's word for us involves at least three commands: to flee, to sing and to be silent. May the Lord strengthen us to serve him in a world filled with sorrow and injustice, hungry for the hope that is in Christ.

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