

Profit from

The Minor Prophets

10: Zechariah

"In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet."

Zechariah 1:1

Zechariah was "the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo." Iddo was head of one of the priestly families that returned from Babylon to Judea. So Zechariah was a member of the tribe of Levi; he probably served as both a priest and a prophet. He was one of three prophets (the others were Haggai and Malachi) who brought the word of the Lord to the exiles recently returned to Jerusalem. Encouragement and hope are the big themes of his prophecies.

Like some of the other prophetic books, Zechariah is a collection of separate visions. You should not expect to find a continuous, joined-up story.

When Did Zechariah Prophesy?

Zechariah lived and prophesied in the years after the Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah had said that the people of Judah would be allowed to return to the Promised Land after 70 years and that is what happened. God began to fulfil the promise when He raised up Cyrus the Great as ruler of Persia, just as the prophet Isaiah had predicted.

"I am the Lord, who makes all things,
Who says of Cyrus, ' He is My shepherd,
And he shall perform all My pleasure,
Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built,"
And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." ' "

Isaiah 44:28

Cyrus united the Persians and the Medes under his rule, and then went on, in 539BC, to conquer Babylon and absorb its territory into his own empire. A year later he allowed the people of Judah to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple.

The first group of Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Sheshbazzar in 537BC. An altar for the temple was erected in the second half of that year, and construction of the temple itself started the spring of 536BC.

The minor Persian province to which exiles of Judah returned was now called Judea, and it encompassed only a small bit of the territory that had once belonged to Judah. Edomites occupied the area just south of Judea. The territory that had once belonged to the northern kingdom of Israel was divided into several provinces — Samaria was one of them.

Although the Persians accommodated the Jews in a lot of things, taxes were high and life was hard in Judea. Jerusalem was still only partially rebuilt and was on the sidelines of world significance. On top of that the returning Jews faced ongoing opposition from the people who already occupied the land as well as from enemies round about. All-in-all it is hardly surprising that there were many among them who became discouraged. They lost their vision and sense of spiritual purpose and settled down to just getting on with building new lives for themselves. Work on the temple was abandoned for 16 years, until 520BC. Because of that and to add to their hardship they were chastened by God: He caused their crops to fail. But God also raised up two prophets to turn them back to Himself. In 520BC, Haggai called for the Israelites to sort out their priorities and get back to rebuilding the temple. Zechariah began his ministry just two months later.

Haggai and Zechariah did not stop prophesying when work began in earnest on the temple. They continued to encourage the people. Haggai's messages were delivered in 520BC; Zechariah's prophecies were given in form 520 to 518BC. The new temple was finally completed in 515BC when it was dedicated with great rejoicing.

Outline

A call to repent 1:1–6

The visions of Zechariah 1:7–6:15

- A vision of horses 1:7–17
- A vision of horns 1:18–21
- A vision of a surveyor 2:1–13
- A vision of the high priest 3:1–10
- A vision of a lampstand and olive trees 4:1–14
- A vision of a flying scroll 5:1–4
- A vision of a woman in a basket 5:5–11
- A vision of four chariots 6:1–8
- The crowning of Joshua 6:9–15

A question about fasting 7:1–8:23

- An inquiry by a delegation from Bethel 7:1–3
- The Lord's rebuke of empty ritualism 7:4–14
- The future restoration of Zion 8:1–23

An oracle concerning the nations and Israel 9:1–11:17

- A divine warrior hymn 9:1–17
- A plan for restoration 10:1–12
- The rejection of the Good Shepherd 11:1–17

An oracle concerning Israel's future 12:1–14:21

- The physical deliverance of the nation 12:1–9
- The spiritual renewal of the nation 12:10–13:6
- The fate of the shepherd and the flock 13:7–9
- The Second Coming of the Messiah 14:1–7
- The kingdom of the Messiah 14:8–11
- The judgment of Israel's enemies 14:12–15
- Worship in the Messiah's kingdom 14:16–21

Zechariah's Message

Zechariah's prophecies challenged, comforted and encouraged the people to persevere in the rebuilding of the temple with talk of God's future plans for His people.

In the early chapters, Zechariah focusses on God's choice of Jerusalem — He has not set aside His covenant people. Indeed, through Zechariah, God reaffirmed His choice and His promise to come and live among them. In the second half of the book, Zechariah lays out God's future plans for His chosen people, — the overthrow of Israel's enemies, the future glories of Zion and the universal reign of the Messiah. This is the overarching theme of the book: the complete restoration of God's people by the coming Messiah.

Zechariah addressed discouragement by reminding his hearers that God's envoys were watching everything, and that when the time was right, He would act. If the people would heed the prophets and turn to the Lord, they would find Him turning to them. He would trouble the nations who were enjoying rest and grant rest to his troubled people, making Jerusalem a place of universal pilgrimage. He told them that the temple that was being rebuilt and the priesthood that would serve in it were signs of the Lord's commitment to His people, a commitment that would be demonstrated by the ultimate removal of all their sin from the land. He told them this would happen when the promised Davidic king, the "Branch", would come to live among and rule over them. The result would be peace, harmony, and prosperity for all the inhabitants of the land.

He told them, the coming king will not be like other rulers. He will be righteous and humble, bringing salvation. In contrast to shepherds who feed themselves and neglect their flock, this good shepherd will take care of his sheep and provide for them. He will cleanse them of all their iniquities. Nevertheless the flock will reject him, and the Lord's own sword will be turned against him. The sheep will be scattered and left to their oppressors in a time of trial and testing before ultimately God redeems His flock and rescues His city. Then final judgment will come upon all the nations and Jerusalem will be restored as the city of God.

Zechariah prophesied the Messiah's entrance into Jerusalem on a colt, His betrayal for 30 pieces of silver, the piercing of His hands and feet, and cleansing from sin through His death. In fact, chapters 9 – 14 of Zechariah are the section from the Prophets that is most often quoted in the New Testament. One estimate, says 54 passages from Zechariah are mentioned in about 67 different places in the New Testament.

Along with his teaching about the Messiah, Zechariah has an important message about God's plan of salvation. The removal of the high priest's filthy garments and the provision of clean festal robes illustrates the work of Christ, stripping us of our sins and clothing us with His own righteousness.

Zechariah also reminds us that true religion is not found in external pious acts but depends on a personal relationship with God. That relationship should change attitudes. Like other prophets before him, Zechariah condemns the oppression of the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor and calls God's people back to justice, kindness, compassion, and truth.

Questions To Think About

- Zechariah makes extensive use of picture language. Pick out some of the most striking images. What is the message each one conveys?
- How can the lessons of Zechariah's prophecies be applied today?