

Chapter 56 Zechariah 1-8

Zechariah's Vision of the Household of Faith

“So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty. . . . ‘Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel?’”

Zechariah 4:6,10

Haggai and Zechariah were a team, focused on the same theme, but judging from their writings, two very different personalities (Ezra 5:1). Their ministry aims converged but their ministry styles diverged. If we compare them to the gospel writers, Haggai reminds us of Mark, with his bullet points and tag line imperatives, and Zechariah reminds us of John with his praying imagination and his powerful images and metaphors. Haggai called the people to their God-given responsibility and Zechariah called them to their God-given identity. Together, these two prophets helped forge a new community in the Spirit. Brick and mortar converged with heart and soul. One foot-in-front-of-the-other-obedience was inspired by “big picture” Spirit-led-visions. The universal scope of God’s Kingdom work was presented, grasped and worked out on the local level. These two prophets worked in tandem to verify the witness and proclaim the truth of the coming kingdom of God.

The Book of Zechariah divides into two identity-shaping parts: part one consists of eight unusual visions, all of which relate in some way to the rebuilding of the temple. Without apology, Zechariah accredits these visions to the Lord, who gave him eight visionary clips in rapid succession on the night of February 15, 519 B.C. (the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius). Zechariah’s night-long, Spirit-inspired stream of consciousness was one great vision of God’s building program. This singular vision, united in both time and theme, was divided into eight segments that formed an enigmatic collage of God’s sovereign will for humanity and his kingdom.

Part two consists of a series of prophetic messages on true spirituality, social ethics, the coming of the kingdom of God and the believer’s future hope. The messages center on the believer’s actions, feelings, hopes and expectations, in the light of the consummation of the age. Images of final judgment are juxtaposed with scenes of everlasting salvation. Messianic prophecy is woven right into the fabric of Zechariah’s messages. We are familiar with some of Zechariah’s famous lines, especially those that have to do with the Messiah. Such as, “See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (9:9); Or these ironic words, “They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (12:10). We think of Jesus’ betrayal when we read of a “thirty pieces of silver” pay off (11:12). We think of the Cross, when we read, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. . .” (13:7).

One well-known biblical scholar lists eleven direct quotations in the New Testament from Zechariah with sixty-four allusions, most of them in the Gospels and the book of Revelation

(Webb, 48). Zechariah's visions and messages were not only critical in forging a new identity for the post-exilic community, they remain especially important for forging the identity of the church. We cannot read Zechariah without thinking of Jesus. He is the carpenter par excellence, the great high priest, the descendant of David, the good shepherd, the humble king, the pierced one, and the coming King of kings and Lord of lords. Undoubtedly Zechariah was unaware of the fact that all these allusions pertained to one person, the Incarnate One, but he was fully aware of the ever increasing humility prescribed by God to redeem his people. Zechariah's Spirit-inspired prophecy not only inspired the post-exilic community, but it shaped Jesus' understanding of his work and the early church's understanding of Jesus. We may find Zechariah's visions and messages obscure and too difficult to be bothered with, but the early Christians were inspired and strengthened by them. In the Spirit, Zechariah helps us build the household of faith and stay in the story.

Return to Me

Haggai was instrumental in helping the people take the first step and stay on task. Zechariah was important for instilling a vision for the kingdom of God. If we don't know where we are in the grand scheme of things, the nitty-gritty details of work and mission can become all absorbing. We can quickly lose perspective and begin to think that we are managing God's project for God. At first it may only be a subtle shift of emphasis but in time major truths are quietly set aside. We drop the reality of God's anger with sin and the final judgment. And the geopolitical dimensions of salvation history and God's global mission get shrunk down to a highly individualized, existential faith. We tend to interiorize and spiritualize God's mission and reduce it to a religious experience. What was meant to be a profound relationship with the Lord of the universe becomes co-opted into religious feelings, meetings, buildings, and personalities. Somebody else's vision for Christianized self-help replaces God's vision for reaching the nations with the gospel, but the process has been so subtle and pervasive that we have hardly noticed. Zechariah is a necessary corrective to this common spiritual malady. He is God's Advent prophet reminding us that "unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain." (Psalm 127:1).

The book of Zechariah opens with a call to repentance, but not the kind of individualized repentance we are accustomed to. This is a big-picture, community-wide repentance (1:1-6). The scale of repentance is on the order of America's repentance for slavery, Germany's repentance for the holocaust, and South Africa's repentance for apartheid. In order to start over, the sins of the past had to be confessed, rejected, and repented of. A fresh start, on the scale envisioned by the prophet, required a shared perspective on the past. The so-called glory days of the past were not to be envied, but lamented. God's judgment of the previous generation that was sent into captivity was holy and just. God's anger was justified. There were no grounds for disappointment with God. If the people did not come to terms with their sinful past, there was no hope for the future. Humility, rather than blame, provided the key for reconstituting the people of God.

Before Zechariah could proceed with the big picture of God's kingdom work, the people had to rise above the past, and the only way to do that was through repentance, devotion to God, and transformation. The prophet declared, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty." Note

Zechariah's three-fold emphasis on who it was that was insisting on this message. He made sure the people understood that it was the Lord who was speaking and not himself. Like the post-exilic community, we will never rise above the sins of the past, the broken homes, the divorces, the spiritual indifference, the self-centeredness, the abuse and addictions, the destructive relational patterns, the greed and the envy, the hate and the jealousy, the idolatry and the lust, until we repent of our sin and turn to the Lord. This is not the religious rhetoric of a bygone era but an essential perspective for moving forward in our relationship with the Lord. The hardest work involved in starting over is not financial or physical. It is not the scarcity of resources or the physical hardships, but the condition of our hearts. If we are angry at God, accusing him of meanness and injustice, we would be better off humbly asking whether or not God is angry at us.

When our daughter was young she didn't always take to correction, let alone punishment, very well. Ginny and I still remember the look and tone of defiance when I asked Kennerly to pick up her toys in the living room. This two and half foot tall two-year-old stood up straight and looked into my eyes and said, "No." Sensing trouble both Jeremiah and Andrew immediately left the room. I repeated the request that had now become a command, and she stood her ground and repeated her, "No." So being the loving father that I am I spanked her and told her to pick up the room, which she did with a pout and a grudge. But what we remember most about that incident was that for hours afterward Kennerly acted as if I was no longer her friend. Since I punished her, she would punish me. She didn't need or want my forgiveness. I needed to ask her for forgiveness.

Blaming God for suffering the spiritual and physical consequences of our own actions is built into the human condition. This is what we have to come to terms with, personally and corporately, if we expect to return to the Lord and experience spiritual renewal. Repentance is the first step in starting over. "Then they repented and said, 'The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do'" (1:6).

Rebuilding My House

The word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the night in the form of eight visions. Each vision could trigger a full scale study of major Old Testament themes including divine judgment, the temple, the priesthood, and the messianic prophecies. But such an approach would slow the momentum and dull the impact of Zechariah's fast paced revelation. Instead of dividing up these visions into separate sermons or chapters, it is best to take in the whole series of visions as a single powerful message on the coming kingdom of God. A quick survey of the visions indicates that in some way or another each relates to building the household of faith.

A Scouting Party. In the first vision, Zechariah sees a team of horses and riders in a ravine shaded by myrtle trees. The fragrant evergreen shrubs and chestnut colored lead horse offers an idyllic pastoral picture. They have just come from a reconnaissance mission throughout the earth and they report to the angel of the Lord that they have found the whole world at rest and in peace. This report of world peace, however, arouses God's anger, because it is at the expense of his people and is based on injustice and oppression. Not all peace comes from God or honors God (see Jeremiah 8:11; John 14:27). The findings of this worldwide reconnaissance mission are

consistent with the apostle John's description in the book of Revelation of the beautiful side of evil and the peace of the beast. The Lord responds to this complacency and conspiratorial evil with words of comfort for his people and anger against the nations. "I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. . . . Therefore, I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt" (1:14-16). The promise to rebuild his house is instrumental in bringing justice and salvation to the nations. Zechariah's vision takes Haggai's one stone upon another obedience and places it in the big picture of God's salvation history. Yet no explanation is given of how this rebuilt house of the Lord is going to defeat the nations that are at rest and in peace. We have to take the Lord's word for it. We have to live by faith, knowing that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love of Christ (Rom 8:35).

Four Superpowers and Four Carpenters. The second vision of four horns, symbolizes the world's militaristic superpowers, that have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem. However, there is a surprising twist to this vision. Four craftsmen come along and terrify the superpowers. No explanation is given for how this will be done. The word for "craftsmen" is a humble, unpretentious term, which is translated "carpenters" in the authorized version. "It does not refer to rulers, or military leaders, or scholars, but to people who work with their hands, skillfully, to be sure—but not with hands that grasp the instruments of power. It is used of the weavers, engravers and carpenters who worked on the tabernacle in the days of Moses, and on the temple in the time of Solomon" (Webb, 76). Zechariah envisioned a competition between superpowers and carpenters, with the carpenters winning, which doesn't really make sense, until we remember that it was the son of a carpenter who said, "I will build my church, and gates of death will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18).

A Surveyor. In his third vision, Zechariah meets a man who is surveying the city of Jerusalem to determine where the city walls should be built. When suddenly an angel is told to inform the man that his work is unnecessary, because Jerusalem "will be a city without walls because of the great number of people and animals in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it," declares the Lord, "and I will be its glory within" (2:4-5). The contrast between the on-going minor league building project in Jerusalem and the eventual reality of God's kingdom come could not have been greater. Ezra's temple and Nehemiah's walls were hardly to be compared to the Holy City, but they were a start and reason enough to send out the word, "Come! Come! Flee. . ." The future hope sparked a sense of urgency in the present. "Come, Zion! Escape. . ." Get the word out. Let every exile return home. "Shout and be glad, Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the Lord." Anyone seeking to put a boundary around Jerusalem misunderstood the inclusiveness of Zion. This is spelled out in words that make Christians think of Jesus' Great Commission and his High Priestly prayer in John 17. "Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you" (2:11; see Jn 1:14; Mt 28:19; Jn 17:21). Of course all of this will happen not by human effort, but by God's action. Success will not be achieved by wrong-headed activism. "Be still before the Lord, all people, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (2:13).

The High Priest. The fourth vision is all about Joshua, the high priest. He stands before the Lord as a representative of God's people under accusation by Satan. He is like a burning branch plucked from the fire in the nick of time. His clothes are filthy. At first glance Joshua's weakness

and disgrace may not seem to have anything to do with the temple building program, until we realize that the temple reconstruction was under the supervision of Joshua and the priests (Ezra 3:8). Joshua did not fare well in Zechariah's vision, but that was not because he was an especially sinful high priest. No Israelite reading Zechariah's prophecy would have thought that they were any better than Joshua, and if the high priest was so vulnerable to Satan's accusation, what hope was there for them? If Joshua was little more than damaged goods and dressed in embarrassingly filthy clothes what value did the people have? The phrases used to describe Joshua are drawn from the earlier prophets. The stick snatched from the fire comes from Amos (4:11) and the filthy clothes recalls Isaiah (64:6). Nevertheless, as undeserving as he was, the Lord came through for Joshua. The Lord rebuked Satan and removed his dirty clothes. "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you" (3:4). The removal of the old filthy clothes symbolized the removal of sin and guilt and the clean turban symbolized Joshua's restoration as high priest. And what the Lord did for Joshua, the people's representative, he did for them all. But he not only represented the people, Joshua was "symbolic of things to come" (3:8). Haggai emphasized Zerubbabel, the Lord's signet ring, and Zechariah emphasized Joshua the High Priest. Together they represented the coming Messiah.

In symbolic laden language the Lord cryptically promised, "I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it," says the Lord Almighty, "and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day" (3:8-9). The poet-prophet's compressed truth drew on Jeremiah and Isaiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-16; Isaiah 11:1; 53:2). The Branch was a poetic term for the future Messiah. The seven-eyed engraved stone may suggest the high priest's breastplate (Ex 28:16-28) or a commemorative stone that inscribed God's acquittal of all sin for all time. The removal of sin in a single day alludes to the Day of Atonement when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of a sacrificial lamb. Zechariah moves these powerful images and symbols forward in anticipation of the coming Messiah. Christians cannot read this without thinking of Jesus, our great high priest, who can empathize with our weaknesses because he was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Heb 4:15). The Day of Atonement was an annual reminder of sins, but by God's grace, "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb 10:10).

The fourth vision ends in a way consistent with the three previous visions. "In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree," declares the Lord Almighty" (3:10). The vision closes with a homey and familiar Old Testament picture of contentment (1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 18:31; Micah 4:4). There is no razzle-dazzle or full-court press. The destiny of the people of God does not depend on what they can achieve, but what they will receive from the sovereign Lord God. Once again the message comes through, "Be still before the Lord, all people, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (2:13).

A Seven-Bowl Golden Lampstand and Two Olive Trees. The fifth vision, along with the fourth, forms the poetic and theological center of Zechariah's unified message on God's kingdom work. The lampstand symbolizes the light of revelation and its connection to two olive trees for a continuous supply of oil, symbolizes the Holy Spirit. Zechariah asked the angel about the lampstand and olive trees, but before he answered Zechariah's question, he summarized the message of the entire vision. Right at the center of this revelation, the angel repeated the central

thrust of all eight visions. “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (4:6). Two figures stand at the center of God’s revelation to Zechariah, Joshua, the high priest and Zerubbabel, the political ruler. Together they symbolize the coming Messiah, the Branch, who will build the temple of the Lord.

Figurative speaking, the hands of Zerubbabel laid the foundation of the temple and “his hands will also complete it, so that “you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you” (5:9). The pattern of ever-increasing humility must not be despised but embraced. “Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel” (4:10). Once again, Zechariah asks the angel to explain the olive trees and lampstand and the angel expresses surprise over Zechariah’s lack of comprehension and then says, “These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth” (4:14). Some scholars suggest Haggai and Zechariah, but in the immediate context it seems more likely that Joshua and Zerubbabel are the two that embody and symbolize the witness of the Lord in all the earth. The Word and the Spirit sustain the household of faith in a largely hostile environment. The imagery points forward to Christ—the Living Word and the Spirit of Christ, the one and only essential resource needed to achieve God’s kingdom purposes. In Christ, we have what we need to pursue God’s kingdom work. The apostle John’s praying imagination captured the essence of Zechariah’s vision when he pictured Christ, the great high priest, shining like the sun in all its brilliance, walking amidst the lampstands. This juxtaposition of humble candle power and unlimited Son power remains in today’s household of faith (Rev 1:12-16).

A Flying Banner, A Basketful of Wickedness, Four Chariots. The sixth, seventh and eighth visions follow in quick succession and describe God’s judgment of evil. A flying scroll, measuring 30 feet by 15 feet, announces God’s verdict against evil. Two offenses, stealing and perjury, are picked out to represent the entire law. This fast-moving, billboard size banner advertizes the consequences of sin everywhere and has immediate access to the homes of violators. There is no privacy from sin’s destruction. Everyone is informed. Everyone knows. No one can claim ignorance or say they failed to read the fine print. God’s message on sin is as devastating as it is pervasive. In Zechariah’s seventh vision, wickedness is personified as a woman in a big basket. The moment the lead cover is lifted she tries to get out, but she is pushed back into the basket and the lead cover is secured. Then suddenly two winged women swoop down and carry the basket to the ancient site of Babel “to build a house for it,” This is a fitting place for evil’s toxic waste dump. The message of the seventh vision is that evil will be safely, swiftly, and permanently far removed from the people of God. The fact that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of human beings,” is no secret (Rom 1:18). And the billboard making this known is not only in our face, but in our hearts (Rom 2:15).

The eighth vision builds on the two previous visions and continues the focus on evil. Zechariah looked up again and this time he sees four chariots coming out from between two mountains, described as “mountains of bronze,” which may be suggestive of the light of dawn. The first and last visions parallel one another. The scouting party on a reconnaissance mission reports at dusk and four powerful chariots go forth to conquer at dawn. The complacency of an unjust world will be shattered as “the four spirits of heaven” go “out from the presence of the Lord of the whole

world” (6:5). God sends them forth with a great commission, “Go throughout the earth!” and as they go they achieve his powerful purpose. The angel of the Lord says to Zechariah, “Look at them go! The ones going north are conveying a sense of my Spirit, serene and secure. No more trouble from that direction” (6:8, The Message).

Zechariah’s identity-shaping vision of God’s rebuilding program inspired immediate action. With silver and gold acquired from the returning exiles, Zechariah was instructed to have a crown made. He then placed the crown on Joshua, not Zerubbabel, as we might have expected. But the high priest wore the crown only briefly as Zechariah made the following pronouncement, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty, and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two” (6:12-13). The symbolic crowning of Joshua anticipates the coming of the Messiah who will build the temple and establish God’s kingdom. The crown did not remain on Joshua, but was placed as a memorial in the temple of the Lord.

Zechariah’s prophecy played a key role in God’s cradle-building. In preparation for the Incarnate One, Haggai gave the people a task to perform and Zechariah gave them an identity to fulfill. The prophet’s vision of God’s coming kingdom affirmed the pattern of ever-increasing humility, faithful obedience and quiet confidence in the power of God that remains with us today in the household of faith.