

Chapter 57 Zechariah 9-14

The Shepherd King

“See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. . . .He will proclaim peace to the nations. . . .As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.” Zechariah 9:9-11

The second half of the book of Zechariah continues to shape the identity of the post-exilic people of God, only this time with sermons instead of visions and object lessons. In the Spirit, Zechariah unleashes a series of provocative messages and powerful images that challenge the spiritual status quo and compel a long-range perspective on God’s coming kingdom.

The catalysis for Zechariah’s first message is a question about fasting which was raised by a delegation from Bethel, a town 12 miles north of Jerusalem (see Ezra 2:8). The group came to Jerusalem on December 7, 518 BC with a pressing question for the priests of the house of the Lord about religious rituals. For the last sixty-nine years the Jews had fasted in the fifth month to commemorate the fall of the temple in 587 BC. Judging from Zechariah’s response there was a whole series of fasts (7:5; 8:19). The Jews fasted in the tenth month to remember the siege of Jerusalem in 588 BC (2 Kings 25:1; Jeremiah 39:1), and in the fourth month to coincide with the initial attack on Jerusalem and the attempted escape by the army and Zedekiah in 587 BC (2 Kings 25:3-7; Jeremiah 39:1-10; 52:6-11). Fasting in the fifth month memorialized the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:8-12; Jeremiah 52:12-16) and in the seventh month it recalled the assassination of Gedaliah the governor (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jeremiah 41:1-3). For more than sixty years these painful days of national tragedy were remembered with fasting. But now, with the reconstruction of the temple underway the question was raised by the leader of the delegation from Bethel, “Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” (7:3).

This was a reasoned religious question, and, like so many of the questions directed to Jesus during his earthly ministry, it was tinged with personal self-righteousness. On the surface it seemed innocent enough, but this single question exposed the preoccupation of those who prioritized religion over relationship. Undoubtedly the delegation thought that a council of priests would decide that the time had come to relax the burden of these special observances which disrupted the regular work week. But instead, they got much more than they bargained for. The word of the Lord Almighty came to Zechariah, and in a style that makes us think of Jesus, the prophet answered a perfunctory legal question with a soul-searching personal question. Speaking for the Lord, he asked, “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, *was it really for me* that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?” (7:5-6).

Zechariah’s question, coming as it did from the Lord rather than himself, implied that for seventy years they had focused on the wrong thing. They had practiced religion without pursuing a

relationship with God. They had prioritized observances over obedience. There are echoes in this first message of Zechariah's opening call to repentance and Haggai's concerns about complacent self-centeredness. For seventy years they had prided themselves on their tradition of memorializing Jerusalem's darkest hours, but they had missed the point of God's judgment. Instead of learning from the judgment and being conscience stricken for their sins and that of their ancestors, they were debating whether or not they still had to perform these self-imposed ritual fasts.

Furthermore, Zechariah questioned, not only the purpose of their fast days, but the purpose of their feast days as well. He said, "And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?" I imagine that the Bethel delegation was taken back by this line of questioning. They had a respectable, if not innocuous, religious question that they presented to the priests in Jerusalem for their formal decision. But Zechariah insisted on taking the question beyond religion to their relationship with the Lord. Religion can be neatly compartmentalized and confined to special days, rituals and offerings. But the return-to-me relationship, emphasized in chapter one, knows no borders and boundaries. All of life, whether fasting or feasting, is an expression of devotion to God.

The primary evidence of true devotion to God was not found in special days of fasting but in daily obedience. "This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other'" (7:9-10). Building on the prophets that had come before, such as Amos and Jeremiah, Zechariah zeroes in the reasons why the people had been scattered among the nations. To memorialize the past without lamenting the people's hard-hearted refusal to pay attention to God undermined the meaning of the divine judgment. Implicit in Zechariah's message was the concern that the sins of the past were being passed down to the present.

To counteract religion-as-usual, Zechariah preached a message of hope. Once again he picks up the theme of chapter one, "Return to me," declares the Lord Almighty, "and I will return to you" (1:3). Zechariah answered the skeptical and the complacent with a vision of God's zeal for Zion (8:2). He envisioned the new Jerusalem, the City of Truth, the Holy Mountain, as a safe place where the elderly and young could be at peace and enjoy life (8:4-5; see 1:17; 3:10). The days of judgment were over and the remnant was given the opportunity of a fresh start. If these promises sounded too good to be true then the returning remnant should consider who it was that was giving these promises. What the Lord said to Sarah remained true for the returnees, "Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time. . ." (Gen 18:14). The promises given to the prophet Jeremiah were about to be fulfilled: "I am the Lord, the God of the whole human race. Is anything too hard for me? . . . Once more fields will be bought in this land of which you say, 'It is a desolate waste, without people or animals, for it has been given into the hands of the Babylonians.' Fields will be bought for silver, and deeds will be signed, sealed and witnessed in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem, in the towns of Judah and in the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, because I will restore their fortunes, declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 32:27,43-44).

In the light of God's promises, Zechariah proclaimed the word of the Lord Almighty and echoed Haggai's theme, saying, "Now hear these words, 'Let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built'" (8:9). Rebuilding the temple coincided with rebuilding human relationships. "Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment on your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the Lord" (8:16). The sad reminders of Jerusalem's destruction were to be replaced by happy festivals celebrating truth and shalom.

Zechariah's final thrust envisions the universal longing for God among the nations (see 2:11; Isa 2:2-4; 66:18-21; Micah 4:1-5). The new Jerusalem will be a city without walls and evangelism will spread from one city to another. People from many nations will encourage one another to seek the Lord. Like the magi, people will come from afar to worship the King (Mt 2:1; Psalm 87). The appeal of the gospel of grace will be free from propaganda or indoctrination or proselytizing arm-twisting. "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (8:23). The number ten symbolizes completeness and envisions the ten thousand times ten thousand that will encircle the throne of the Lamb (Rev 5:11). No one will be forced against their will. On the contrary, they will be eager to come to God.

The Coming King

Having described the kingdom, Zechariah now turns his attention to the coming King who will establish his kingdom through his own personal suffering. The origins of this kingdom are not founded on worldly power, but on lowliness, suffering and death. This is the prophet Zechariah's Passion narrative, depicting the coming King in ways hardly imaginable to the post exilic community, but in ways that cause us to think of Jesus.

Jesus had Zechariah's prophecy of the messiah in mind when he instructed the disciples to borrow the young donkey colt for his entrance into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-2). Following the last supper, Jesus quoted a line right out of Zechariah to prepare his disciples' for his death, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Mark 14:27). By alluding to these prophecies in Zechariah Jesus shifted the attention away from a triumphant, powerful, and majestic messiah to a lowly, suffering messiah. "The many Old Testament passages which speak of the Messiah's glory and triumph are largely passed over, and his emphasis falls. . . almost exclusively on Zechariah 9-14, Isaiah 53, and Daniel 7, which are the only three passages in the Old Testament where it can plausibly be claimed that the suffering of the Messiah is predicted." R. T. France concludes, "This can hardly be accidental" (Jesus and the Old Testament, 109).

The Humble King

The image and the impact of the coming king are incongruous and reminiscent of the four horns defeated by the four carpenters (1:18-20). The most famous verse in all of Zechariah, "See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey," is preceded by a description of the mighty power of a warrior God who travels

from north to south defeating Israel's enemies. As in the preceding message, Zechariah continued to stress the inclusivity of the gospel. "Those who are left will belong to our God and become like a clan in Judah. . ." (9:7).

Given the Lord's devastating impact on the surrounding nations we anticipate a warrior God charging into Jerusalem on a stallion, laying claim to his triumph, and setting up his throne. But Zechariah imagines a different kind of victory altogether. Gone are the chariots and warhorses and battle bows. The tools of war are destroyed and people are no longer coerced into peace. Peace is not a cessation of hostility that is forced upon them, but a true shalom, a state of genuine well-being. Zechariah has already visualized the homey character of this blessed shalom. "In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree" (3:10) And, "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there" (8:4-5). The Lord proclaims peace to the nations. "His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River (Euphrates) to the ends of the earth" (9:10; see Psalm 72:8-11).

This peace will not be achieved through worldly power and military means but by "the blood of my covenant with you" (9:11). Once again, the message is affirmed: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (4:6). The reference to "the blood of my covenant" is not as well-known as the description of the lowly king, but it deserves to be. For the blood of the covenant, which points to the cross of Christ, offers the crucial explanation as to how this shalom is going to be achieved (see Ex 24:8). The rest of this chapter captures Zechariah's vision of the end, which includes the finality of judgment and the fulfillment of salvation. Zechariah plays out this theme of the end, the way a symphony plays out a musical theme, the repetition is not monotonous, but affirming. Zechariah is a poet-prophet using images of the past to tell the story of the future. Those who are saved are like Joseph rescued from the waterless pit (Gen 37:24). They are like David who defeated Goliath with a slingshot (1 Sam 17:50). They are the Lord's flock and crown jewel (9:16) and the Lord will satisfy them with good things.

If Jesus is the fulfillment of Zechariah's vision of the coming King, then we are led to conclude that "the gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than anyone imagines, but in a way that no one guesses" (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 117). We would be sadly mistaken to allow our worship to become an exercise in religious sentimentality where we miss the enormity of the truth Zechariah prepares us to celebrate: Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Manipulative appeals to the emotions, as well as the power of coercion, are overcome by the power of grace.

The Unappreciated Shepherd

The central subject of Zechariah's next message is leadership. In the Spirit, the prophet's attention shifted from the nations to the biblical community. He began by comparing the bad leadership given to the house of Judah to the leadership the Lord will give. He introduced his central concern concisely, "Therefore the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd. My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the Lord will

care for his flock, the house of Judah. . .” (10:2-3).

Zechariah accentuates the comparison between bad leadership and the Lord’s leadership by elaborating on how the Lord cares for his flock. A series of metaphors, such as *war horse*, *cornerstone*, *tent peg*, and *battle bow*, reinforce the idea that the Lord will give his people stability, strength, and success (10:3-12). They have nothing to fear with the Lord on their side. Sadly, however, the Lord’s future pastoral care is in sharp contrast to the bad leadership they had received. Zechariah opens his description of bad leadership by lamenting a total environmental disaster (11:1-3). Bad leadership is as tragic as a hurricane disaster or a catastrophic flood.

To illustrate this tragedy Zechariah tells the story of two shepherds. The first part of the story describes a good shepherd who is unappreciated and rejected by the flock. The second part of the story is about the foolish shepherd who does nothing for the sheep but cause harm. The flock in question is marked for slaughter. Instead of raising a healthy flock for their wool, this flock is being fattened up by greedy shepherds who are only interested in how much money they can make when they sell their sheep for meat. For Zechariah, the flock works as a metaphor for a consumer society intent on trading in the bodies and souls of men and women. The commodity is people and those who sell them say, “Praise the Lord, I am rich!” There is plenty evidence in our own day of the “Jesus business” and the consumer church. Shepherds feed their egos and line their pockets with the size of their flocks. They fatten up the religious consumer by selling entertainment and self-help strategies. Unashamed, they appeal to the widest possible audience with the weakest possible message. Selling Jesus has become a big business with market strategies, product lines and consumer appeal.

Even though the whole orientation of the flock was twisted and perverted, Zechariah was called to be their shepherd. He was particularly concerned to shepherd the oppressed of the flock and to use the right equipment to do so. Two staffs signified the quality of his shepherding. He named one staff, *grace*, and another staff, *union*. These two staffs were like the *covenant vows* and the *wedding rings* in a marriage ceremony. They represented God’s promise of unmerited favor and holy communion. Everything he brings to his redemptive work is filled with promise and hope. He even got rid of all the bad shepherds right away (11:8). The connection between Zechariah’s allegory and Jesus’ description of the good shepherd comes to mind (John 10:11f). The bad shepherds are like the self-serving hired hands in Jesus’ analogy, who abandon the flock and run away when they see the wolf coming.

Zechariah’s allegory however, has another surprising twist. In spite of the shepherd’s self-sacrificing dedication and the comforting use of his “rod and staff,” the sheep rebel. We don’t picture sheep rebelling, but these are no ordinary sheep. They are like us. Zechariah writes, “The flock detested me, and I grew weary of them and said, ‘I will not be your shepherd. Let the dying die, and the perishing perish. Let those who are left eat one another’s flesh’” (11:8-9). As shocking as it sounds the good shepherd quits his job, resigns his post, and gives them up to their own cannibalism. Zechariah’s experience finds a parallel in the coming of Incarnate One. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). “It is often assumed,” writes Joyce Baldwin, “that if a country were to find a ruler totally dedicated to the

good of his people, who would rid the land of injustice and encourage all that makes for harmony, peace and happiness would prevail. One insight of this prophet is that such a ruler would not only not be welcomed, but he would be positively hated and rejected” (179).

Having dramatically broken the staff called *favor*, which signified the broken covenant between the Lord and his people, the shepherd asked to be reimbursed for his work. “I told them,” says Zechariah, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” It is not clear whether Zechariah is putting himself in the Lord’s situation and describing the Lord’s on-going frustration with a rebellious and disobedient people or whether this is about the people’s personal rejection of Zechariah’s prophetic ministry. Perhaps, it is a combination of both. In any case, a spiteful, money-grubbing people begrudgingly fork over a ridiculously small amount of money for services rendered (see Bruner, Matthew, vol 2, 609). The Lord advised Zechariah to reject the payment, which he did, by throwing it at the usher in the temple.

Thirty pieces of silver was the amount paid to Judas to betray the Messiah. By referencing this amount, Matthew correlates both incidents (Mt 26:16). The relationship between Jesus and Judas is like the relationship between the shepherd and his flock—inexplicable, unimaginably tragic. The rejection of Jesus by Judas, like the rejection of the shepherd by the flock, finds no other cause except sin and evil. The only thing left to be done was to break the second staff called *communion*, signifying the end of fellowship among the people of God.

Zechariah’s last act was to appoint a foolish, worthless shepherd to rule over the flock that detested its true shepherd. “In the end we get the kinds of leaders we have chosen, and this is God’s judgment on us. This is why the church today needs to be constantly nourished and guided by the faithful teaching of God’s Word, and be led by [those] who will give themselves to that as their fundamental calling. That is how God rules and cares for his people, and it is the only thing that will keep the wolves at bay” (Webb, 153; see Acts 20:17-31; 2 Tim 4:1-5).

The Mourned Martyr

Zechariah’s sermon series on the end moves back and forth between the biblical community and the nations. There is a dialectical tension between the church and the world, between Jerusalem and “all the surrounding peoples.” History’s fault line runs between war and worship, judgment and salvation. There is no place for smug religiosity, much less for pride of race or ethnicity. Only God is God. The people of God may look like they are barely hanging on in a pagan world which is arraigned against them, but they will be victorious. Meanwhile those who have used religion for their own ends or bowed before idols of their own making will be subject to God’s cleansing judgment.

The phrase “on that day” occurs sixteen times throughout Zechariah’s sermon on the end of time as we know it and the beginning of time as God promises it to be. Everything bends to the sovereign will of God, including history and the nations. *On that day* Jerusalem will be like an immovable rock, its people strong, its dwellings safe, and its feeblest members will be as mighty as King David. All the nations that attack Jerusalem will be destroyed (12:9). Zechariah proclaims Jerusalem’s total salvation, but the story is more complicated than that. The prophet

has more to say about Jerusalem's *on that day* experience and what is said stands in sharp tension with the promise of Jerusalem's victory. *On that day* there will be great weeping in Jerusalem, her possessions will be plundered, her houses ransacked, her women raped, and half the city will go into exile. *On that day* the nations will be used by God to discipline Jerusalem (14:1-3). *On that day* Jerusalem will be a place of great blessing and great judgment. The fault line runs right through the middle of the city.

The paradox of a blessing and a curse extends to the nations as well. *On that day* the Lord will destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem. The Lord will strike all the nations with the plague and they will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. But in the end the prophet envisions an unexpected reversal, "the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles" (14:16). After all that Zechariah has said about the destruction of the nations, this is wonderful news and is consistent with what he said earlier about "many peoples and powerful nations" coming to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty (8:20-23). "The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name" (14:9; see Acts 4:12).

How do we reconcile these two pictures of Jerusalem—one of victory and one of suffering? How do we reconcile these two visions of the nations—one of defeat and the other of devotion? Zechariah's sermon on the end begins with the triumph of Jerusalem (12:1-9) and then works backward through the tribulation of Jerusalem (13:1-14:2). Finally, he ends his sermon where he began, with a description of the peace of Jerusalem (14:16-21; see 2:10-13; 8:20-23). The prophet starts with the conclusion, begins with the climax, and then describes the means to the end.

The means to the end in Zechariah's end times sermon involved an unexpected mystery, but it is a mystery consistent with the humble King and the unappreciated Shepherd. The pivotal truth in Zechariah's message involves the mysterious mourned martyr (12:10-14). His vision of the warrior God, standing victoriously on the Mount of Olives, is understandable and ties in perfectly with God's judgment of the nations (14:2-5; see 9:1-8). But what must have been most difficult for the post-exilic biblical community to grasp was how this mourned martyr fit into the salvation history story. At the heart of his *On this day* sermon, Zechariah points to the one who was pierced.

Having described the victory of Jerusalem, Zechariah turns his attention to the person who was responsible for this victory. But instead of describing a victorious king he pictures "the one they have pierced" and describes people mourning over his death with intense grief. It is as if they were mourning for their only child or for their firstborn son. The grief is so great that it reminds Zechariah of the nation's sorrow over Josiah's death at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29) or David's grief over Jonathan and Absalom. Sorrow extends to every facet of society, including the royal (David), the prophetic (Nathan), and the priestly (Levi) (see Boda, 488). But the most disturbing aspect of this whole troubling and disconcerting prophecy is that the Lord is spoken of in the first person.

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication. 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 his firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great. . .” (12:10-11).

The Lord promises not only to pour out his Spirit of grace and supplication on the house of David, but to be the very one who was pierced and over whom people mourn. The Lord himself is this mourned martyr murdered in Jerusalem, whose grief-struck inhabitants experience the gift of God’s grace and supplication for forgiveness. The Hebrew word for “pierced” is not the same word that is used in Isaiah 53 for the Suffering Servant but these two descriptions converge with the same person and event in mind.

“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

The followers of Christ, look back on the earthly life and ministry of Jesus as the fulfillment of this promise. At Pentecost God’s Spirit was poured out on his disciples and they preached the truth about Jesus:

“People of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead. . .” (Acts 2:22-24).

When the people heard Peter’s preaching about the Messiah whom they had crucified and God had raised, they were *cut to the heart* and they said to Peter, “What shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38). The crucified Messiah is at the heart of Zechariah’s vision of the day of the Lord.

One final thought. Zechariah’s closing picture of the glorious day of the Lord fits with his earlier description of a sacred place filled with prosperity, security, and neighborly hospitality; a place where the elderly live without fear and the children play in the streets (1:17; 3:10; 8:4-5). He envisions *on that day*, HOLY TO THE LORD inscribed on horses’ harness bells and mundane cooking pots (14:20-21). There will be no secular/sacred divide, no division between that which is holy and that which is profane, because everything will be holy to the Lord. Zechariah’s last line stings: “And *on that day* there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty.” “Canaanite” does not refer to a nationality or to a race of people, but to traders and

merchants—business people who profit from religion (Baldwin, 180, 208). *On that day* everybody involved in the Jesus business will be gone.