



# ZECHARIAH, Being the People of God

## Seeing the World Through God's Eyes

### Lesson 1 Zechariah 1:1-21

#### INTRODUCTION

Despite the relatively high level of interest in prophecy that we see at the present time, especially the interest in books like Daniel and Revelation, the book of Zechariah gets very little popular interest. This situation is unfortunate, not only because the book does add significantly to our understanding of prophetic events such as the return of Christ and the Millennial Kingdom, but because the overall message of Zechariah, although delivered some 2,500 years ago, is such a fitting and needed message for believers today.

The overall purpose of the book is to facilitate the restoration of post-exilic Israel, beginning with the rebuilding of the Temple. The short historical outline below will help explain what I mean. To put it quite simply, to a nation that was God's chosen people but had gone astray for several generations and suffered God's temporal judgment for their sin, Zechariah's message invited them back to fellowship with God and instructed them on what it truly means to be the people of God, in view of their past, their present, and the glorious future that is in store. Because our nation today is not far different from ancient Israel—a nation founded on Godly principles that has through the course of time spiraled further and further from God—the message from Zechariah about being the people of God is a message today's believers in the United States should take to heart.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The nation of Israel was a unified nation under the reigns of King Saul, King David, and then his son King Solomon, but from the end of Solomon's reign (928 B.C.) forward it was divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom, often referred to as Ephraim or Samaria or Israel in the Old Testament, and the southern kingdom, typically referred to as Judah in the Old Testament. The northern kingdom never had a godly king and the conduct of its kings was representative of the terrible sinfulness of its people. The southern kingdom fared only slightly better with a few good kings, but always cycling further away from God. Both kingdoms were warned by God through the prophets to repent but neither did. The northern kingdom fell in about 722 B.C. to the invading Assyrian army. The southern kingdom did not fall until the invasions by the Babylonians beginning in about 605 B.C. Jerusalem was invaded in 605 and 597 B.C. and destroyed in 586 B.C. and consistent with the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11, 29:10) the survivors spent approximately 70 years in captivity. The Babylonian Kingdom came to an end in 539 B.C. when it fell to the Medo-Persian Empire.

It is important to understand that in addition to the rebellion prevalent in Judah prior to the Babylonian invasion, there was also the sense that Jerusalem could never be taken. God had supernaturally spared Jerusalem from the Assyrians (2 Kings 18-19) by destroying 185,000 of their troops, so surely Jerusalem was inviolable. This was something of a "prosperity theology" of the time akin to their thinking centuries earlier that the presence of the ark of the Covenant ensured them the victory in battle. The prophet Jeremiah warned them against this thinking: "Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, *are* these."

It is also important to realize that with the complete destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., including the destruction of the Temple itself, and the displacement of its inhabitants, the nation had lost both a national identity and the focal point of its worship (the Old Testament required various worship activities to be conducted at the Temple). This was a tremendous crisis. They had a place to worship

ever since their journey through the wilderness under Moses' leadership (the Tabernacle), but for the first time in centuries that was all gone. The empty promises of sin and rebellion and false theology had left the Jewish people without a home, without hope (for God had left them in the hands of Gentile oppressors) and in a state of despair.

Significantly, the rule under the Medo-Persian Empire that succeeded the Babylonians as the world superpower brought about a major change in how subject people were dealt with. King Cyrus the Great took over in 539 B.C. and later decreed that the Jewish people could return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:2-4). We know from extra-Biblical history that this move was representative of his dealings with subject peoples generally. The famous Cyrus Cylinder describes his philosophy in his own words: "I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth)... I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and return (them to) their habitations ....May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me (to him); to Marduk, my lord, they may say this: 'Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son.'" Although Cyrus thought he acted on his own to appease the gods, indeed he was the pawn of the one true God: "That saith of Cyrus, *He* is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid." (Isaiah 44:28). Approximately 50,000 Jews returned, which included both the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the High Priest.

The temple was not immediately rebuilt. An altar was constructed so that the sacrifices could resume (Ezra 3:1-6) and later the foundation for the temple was completed (Ezra 3:8-13, 5:16). But the temple's construction halted for 16 years. Also, Cyrus died in battle in 530 B.C. and was succeeded by his son, Cambyses II, a tyrant whose reign ended with his death in 522 B.C. The Jewish historian Josephus commented that Cambyses II was "bad by nature." He apparently fell on his own sword while dismounting a horse and later died. He was succeeded by a 28-year old officer that served under his father named Darius Hystaspes. Darius brought stability to the land and in 520 B.C., the second year of Darius' reign, God raised the prophet Haggai to prompt the people to complete the temple. About the same time, God raised Zechariah whose prophetic ministry had the same basic purpose. Shortly after the Temple construction began in 520 B.C., the Persian governor Tattenai and others challenged the effort, but Darius mandated that the work continue. (Ezra 6:1-12; Haggai 1:1-2). Their ministries were a success and the temple construction resumed and later was completed in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15). Because Zechariah's message (God's message) was very much about encouraging God's people to truly be the people of God in their day-to-day living, the message is every bit as rich and relevant today as it was over 1500 years ago when it was first preached.

## GOD'S CALL TO ABANDON THEIR PAST WAYS (1:1-6)

1:1 "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying,"

The name Zechariah means "Yahweh remembers." As the book unfolds, we will see that the consistent theme is exactly that, namely that Yahweh remembers His people and His promises to them. To a people coming out of a captivity they thought impossible, with very little to return to in Jerusalem, a people in desperate need of hope, they needed to know more than anything that Yahweh remembers.

Zechariah receives this first of his eight night visions (verse 1:7) in October or November, 520 B.C. It is the second year of the reign of the Persian king Darius Hystaspes (521-486 B.C.). What we will read as the book unfolds is not truly Zechariah's message, but God's. It is "*the word of the LORD.*" This is the theme of the first six verses of the book or the preamble of the book, the inviolability of the

Word of God. Increasingly, we find the Bible under attack from all directions. Ultimately, each person has to decide what he or she believes about the Bible. But make no mistake about it, the Bible claims for itself over and over again to be the very Word of God. While the Bible is under attack, many of the scoffers are the same people who claim some sort of superior spirituality. In truth, what we know of God is limited to what God has revealed to certain men, inspired of the Holy Ghost to write the Scriptures. (John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:1-10; 1 Peter 1:21). For this reason, to reject the Word of God is to reject the God of the Word. One cannot say, "I love God" or "I seek God" and at the same time openly reject God's thinking, which is revealed in His Word.

Zechariah is the son of Berechiah and grandson of Iddo. There is much debate about this genealogy because elsewhere Zechariah is referred to only as the son of Iddo (Ezra 5:1, 6:14) and in Isaiah 8:2 there is a Zechariah, son of Jeberekiah, mentioned. Since in the Hebrew the notion of "son" could be used of a grandson, this does not present a problem. Also, Jeberekiah could simply be a longer version of the same name, Berechiah. What is significant is that Zechariah came from a priestly line. (Nehemiah 12:16). Another complication comes from Jesus' statement in Matthew 23:35: "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar." There is no Old Testament reference to the murder of Zechariah (that author of this book) and so people debate whether Jesus had another Zechariah in mind or was mistaken. The best solution is simply that Jesus knew something not recorded in the Old Testament.

## 1:2 "The LORD hath been sore displeased with your fathers."

The historical context of this book is that following the 70 years of Babylonian captivity, God has returned a refined remnant to Israel to reconstitute the nation, through whom God will still fulfill His covenant promises (particularly as to Messiah). This remnant will be reminded of their fathers' rebellion and subsequent judgment. God always warns ahead of time of His judgment. For example, through Habakkuk, He warned that He would bring the Babylonians in judgment against Judah. But they refused to repent because they did not like the message. God was "*sore displeased*" with them and though longsuffering, His pronounced words of judgment came to pass.

## 1:3 "Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the LORD of hosts."

God gives Zechariah the words that he is to deliver to the remnant of Israel. Here again, it is emphasized that this is not Zechariah's message: "*Thus saith the LORD of hosts.*" This is all the credibility the message needs. This is why we can take the teachings of the Scriptures as words to live by, words to parent by, and words to guide our marriages, our social behavior and everything of our lives. Skeptics sometimes ask why a Christian spends so much time learning the Bible. The reason is simple, for in it "*Thus saith the LORD of hosts.*" The Bible is not a prop. Remember what Peter said to Jesus at the end of John 6: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.*"

Notice that it is not just the Lord, but the Lord of Hosts. By hosts is meant armies. God is the great general in charge of armies of angels and able to carry out His will, as we shall see in Zechariah's first vision later in this chapter.

Notice also what God says, "*Turn ye unto me ... and I will turn unto you.*" We can make two critical observations. The first is that this is a call from God to repent (to turn or change one's thinking with a resulting conduct change). This is a common statement throughout the prophets. God always appeals to His people to turn to Him. Here, we must understand this in light of what God just said about their fathers. God was "*sore displeased*" with them, and His appeal to this generation is to not be like their fathers. They had committed treason against the one with whom they had contracted through the mediator Moses. In Deuteronomy 28, the terms of blessings and cursings

are spelled out quite specifically. As a nation, they had breached the treaty with God and suffered the consequences exactly as God told them they would: “But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee.” (Deuteronomy 28:15).

The second point is a promise. When people turn to God, He turns to them. This is a simple principle that God repeats through James in the New Testament: “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded.” (James 4:8). These people had chased the alluring promises of sin and rebellion and found the promises empty and only despair to grasp on to. To every person who lives without hope, the very simple answer to the question of how to make things right in their life begins with this message. Turn to God and He will draw near to you. If we are to believe humanistic psychology, the self-help gurus, or Oprah or false religions, it cannot possibly be that finding real purpose and hope in life can be achieved in this way. To these false prophets, who will pass with time, God’s Word remains true, and this simple statement from Zechariah still remains as step one in being the people of God.

#### QUESTIONS

---

1. Based on verses 2 and 3, what can we deduce about a child’s obligation to follow the ways of their parents in worship, parenting, and behavior in general? What does this say about the priority of traditions?
  2. In practical terms, what does it look like in a person’s life when he turns to God and God turns to Him?
  3. If a person truly wants God’s blessing on his family, his job, his marriage, his relationship with his parents, etc., what is step one?
- 

1:4 “Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Turn ye now from your evil ways, and *from your evil doings*: but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, saith the LORD.”

God is very explicit here. They should not follow the example of their fathers. Their fathers were given revelation from God through His prophets. They were told to repent of their sinful deeds, but they refused to do so. They had competing messages to choose between and they chose to reject God’s message. At the root of their rejection was sin.

#### QUESTIONS

---

4. What do you think their fathers thought about God’s Word revealed through the former prophets? Why didn’t they properly respond and how did they justify their disobedience?
  5. What should we do if we hear a message preached in church that makes us feel guilty or uncomfortable?
- 

1:5 “Your fathers, where *are* they? and the prophets, do they live forever?”

These two rhetorical questions are piercing. Their fathers and the prophets they ignored are dead and gone. But what about the words spoken by the prophets as they were moved of God? Those words stand.

1:6 “But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers? and they returned and said, Like as the LORD of hosts thought to do unto us, according to our ways, and according to our doings, so hath he dealt with us.”

Again, God asks a rhetorical question whose answer is “yes.” God’s Word was true. His warnings of judgment were brought to pass. The Babylonians did invade Judah and defeated it and carried captives to Babylon. In this way, God’s word took hold of their fathers. Although they did not repent before the Word of God took hold of them, those that survived later had to concede that God did to them exactly what He said He would. The evidence was indisputable and so the decision this day to choose God’s message should be an easy one for them.

#### QUESTION

---

6. What is the implication from this verse about the proper role of God’s Word in our lives? Does it matter if we do not agree with God’s viewpoint on an issue?
- 

### FIRST NIGHT VISION: GOD THAT IS SOVEREIGN (1:7-17)

1:7 “Upon the four and twentieth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Sebat, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying,”

The day is the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the eleventh month, or Shebat. In our calendar, it is February 15, 519 B.C. This means that about three months have passed since verse 1.

1:8 “I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that *were* in the bottom; and behind him *were there* red horses, speckled, and white.”

This verse begins the first of eight visions commonly referred to as Zechariah’s “night visions.” In a single night, Zechariah saw eight spectacular visions, of which he writes. We should note that much of this book, as in this chapter, is what is known as *apocalyptic literature*. This is highly symbolic literature where God uses symbols to convey His thinking and perspective to us. This literature type often focuses on national or global events. A common aspect of apocalyptic literature that we will see throughout these visions is that God is not trying to “hide the ball,” but instead is trying to teach us. And to the extent that any of the symbolic meanings seem hidden, God provides the answers through angels. And then we are provided the answers through what Zechariah has written.

Zechariah sees a man on a red horse standing by myrtle trees in the bottom of a ravine. He also sees other horses, and although the text does not specify the number, by implication there are four horses, which is consistent with the similar vision in Zechariah 6:1-7. We will see that the number four is symbolic in this chapter, a point we will return to shortly. If there are a total of four horses, then there are two red horses, one speckled and one white. The primary significance of the horses is that horses were associated with militaries in the ancient world; these are the horses of the Lord of Hosts, or Lord of Armies. From the verses that follow, it may be that each horse has a rider.

Myrtle trees are common in Israel. They are very small trees, sometimes looking more like a shrub than a tree. The location of these small trees at the very bottom of the ravine will be significant as the explanation of the vision unfolds. We should note that myrtles were used to construct the booths in the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, a feast specifically mentioned later in this book and a feast that was representative of communion with God. (Nehemiah 8:15).

1:9 “Then said I, O my lord, what *are* these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will show thee what these *be*.”

As already indicated, it is common in apocalyptic literature for God to use an angel to help the prophet (and by application, us) understand the symbols. Zechariah asks the angel what the vision of the four horses meant and the angel agrees to provide the explanation.

1:10 “And the man that stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, These *are they* whom the LORD hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth.”

The speaker is the angel on the red horse that was seen standing in verse 8. He says “*these*” in reference to the four horses (and perhaps riders) that the “LORD hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth.” That there seem to be four horses is important because it speaks of their having walked to and fro in all four directions. The concept of walking to and fro the earth is a statement of God’s dominion over it. If God did not have dominion over it, He could not send His servants to scope it out in its entirety. In Job 1:7, Satan uses similar language to express his belief in his own dominion over the earth: “And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.” Similarly, in Genesis 13:17, God tells Abraham to walk the promised land that God had given him; Abraham’s walking over it would establish his ownership and dominion over it. A similar claim is made by the King of Tyre in Ezekiel 28:14. We live in a world where nations and empires have risen over and over again and claimed authority over the world or part of it, and now more and more humanity as a whole is claiming authority over the world, and Satan is behind these claims to the throne. But God is not limited by these claims, and in particular, God can restore Israel and still fulfill His promises to Israel. Israel has a basis for hope, the best basis their can be, the promise of God.

1:11 “And they answered the angel of the LORD that stood among the myrtle trees, and said, We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.”

The rider on the red horse that spoke to Zechariah is now identified as “the angel of the LORD.” This is a common Old Testament phrase and often the identification is interchanged with Lord. For instance, in Exodus 3, this phrase is interchanged with LORD (Jehovah), and in John 8, Jesus claims to be the “I AM” that spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Accordingly, many conservative theologians believe that “*the angel of the LORD*” is the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. The other riders answer the angel of the Lord. They are providing their report. They have scouted the entire planet (recall earlier God was referred to as “*the LORD of hosts*,” that is, the LORD of armies of angels) and the entire planet is at rest. The point is that the nations are at rest or peace. The question to be answered is why they are at rest.

1:12 “Then the angel of the LORD answered and said, O LORD of hosts, how long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?”

For seventy years, Babylon had domination over Judah and several of its neighbors. God raised up Babylon for the purpose of executing judgment on Judah. The angel of the LORD in this verse is interceding on behalf of Judah and asking God, the LORD of hosts (armies), when the judgment will be lifted.

1:13 “And the LORD answered the angel that talked with me *with good words and comfortable words*.”

God answers the question with “*good words and comfortable words.*” The question was as to when God would lift the judgment and the answer is “now.” This will mean not only that Judah is no longer under the thumb of Babylon (that had occurred almost 20 years prior), but also that Judah is being reconstituted as a nation in its own land and with a temple, the focal points of its worship. God’s message of restoration of His people is the primary theme of Zechariah’s book, which is consistent with the meaning of Zechariah’s name (“Yahweh remembers”).

**1:14** “So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy.”

Now the angel of the LORD speaks to Zechariah and gives him a message from God to the people. These are words of comfort. God’s jealousy for Jerusalem is not sinful jealousy as the word infers when it speaks of human behavior (i.e., according to Merriam-Webster, a: intolerant of rivalry or unfaithfulness b: disposed to suspect rivalry or unfaithfulness). Rather, it speaks of God’s love in action for His people.

**1:15** “And I am very sore displeased with the heathen *that are* at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.”

The “*heathen*” refers to Gentiles. God does not say that He is displeased with all Gentiles, but that He is displeased with the ones “*at ease.*” The reason for God’s displeasure is stated, and this reason helps explain to us the vision. Certain Gentiles are “*at ease*” because they have, from their perspective, destroyed Judah as a nation and are wallowing in a false security. We must recall that God raised the Babylonians to come against Judah as a judgment for its sinfulness and probably the Babylonians are primarily in view here. When the Babylonians were defeated in 539 B.C. by the Medo-Persians, Judah’s affliction was somewhat relieved, but it was still under the thumb of a foreign power. And of course, other Gentiles had oppressed Israel throughout history (e.g., the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Edomites). What God says is that His source of displeasure is when a nation He raised to bring judgment went too far, it “*helped forward the affliction.*” With specific reference to Babylon, God prophesied their fall even before their defeat of Judah. (Isaiah 47:5-9). They overstepped their bounds and increased the punishment of the Jews. God did intend “*affliction*” for his people, in the form of judgment for sinfulness, and although the judgment would mean death for some and scattering for others, the actual judgment inflicted was more severe than God had authorized.

#### QUESTIONS

---

7. What is a Biblical worldview? How does this concept relate to Zechariah’s night vision?
  8. Should Christians desire to have a Biblical worldview, and if so, what should be done to develop a Biblical worldview?
- 

**1:16** “Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem.”

God says He has returned to Jerusalem with mercies (i.e., compassion). This statement makes sense in light of the next statement, namely that “*my house*” (the Temple) will be rebuilt. The original Temple, often referred to as Solomon’s Temple because it was constructed during his reign as the king of Israel, was destroyed in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians. Like the little book of Haggai, a primary theme of Zechariah’s prophecy is to encourage the rebuilding of the Temple. The implication from God’s return is that He left at some point prior to this time (see Ezekiel 10-11). After God’s departure from Jerusalem, the Babylonians were able to overtake it. But now, God has returned and the remnant is safe. A line will be used to measure the size of Jerusalem. This is foreshadowing that Jerusalem’s future, from Zechariah’s time, will far exceed its past glory.

**1:17** “Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem.”

This is good news. God is promising His people that He will prosper the nation. God reminds them that He “*shall yet choose Jerusalem,*” that is, they are still His people and the promises to them will still be honored. Paul expresses a similar thought in Romans 11:1: “*I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.*” God’s promises to Israel still stand and await future fulfillment, a topic Zechariah will take up later in the book.

**QUESTION**

---

9. When God makes a promise, can you count on Him? If so, what does that look like in a person’s life? For a church?

---