

Zechariah

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[0 : 00] what your initial reaction was when you first discovered that we would be studying the book of Zechariah in the neighborhood fellowships. Perhaps some of you, the reaction was Zecahu.

Of course, you've heard the name, but I suspect many of us would have had difficulty saying too much about Zechariah. He sounds a little bit like a character from a Dickens novel. Maybe some of us will know a little bit about his namesake, the father of John the Baptist, a more familiar figure, I think, for most. But the prophet Zechariah, I don't think is one we are overly familiar with, to put it generously. Or maybe to approach this from a different angle, if before you had had the opportunity, those of you who have had the opportunity of participating in the first study on the book of Zechariah, imagine yourself before you'd had that opportunity. And I'd ask you to write down everything you knew about Zechariah and about his prophecy. Now, how much paper would you have needed? Would you have needed a couple of pages of A4? Maybe one? Maybe half a page? Or maybe the back of a postage stamp? I don't know. I wonder how much we would have been able to say about Zechariah, to be honest. I think I would have struggled to say much about Zechariah. I don't know how it is for you, but for me, you know, the minor prophets, they all seem to merge into one, and it's difficult to distinguish one from another. So, for my own benefit, and I hope and trust for your benefit also,

I thought there might be merit in spending one evening this evening giving an overview of the book. Not preaching on one text within the book, but endeavoring, and we'll see how we get on to give an introduction, an overview to the whole of the book. So, that's what we're going to be doing this evening. And in doing this, really, I have three related or parallel objectives. I would hope and trust that as a standalone sermon, the message this evening would be of profit and encouragement to God's people. Zechariah is very especially a prophecy of encouragement for God's people. So, I hope that it will serve that purpose as a standalone sermon. But also, as I've already mentioned, I hope that it will provide helpful background for you as you would participate in the neighborhood fellowships and in the study of this book of Zechariah. And along with that,

I hope that it could serve as an encouragement and maybe a little prod. Maybe for some of you who aren't participating or who this evening really have no intention of participating, I trust that as we think about this book for a few minutes, that might serve as an encouragement and that you would, your appetite would be whetted and you would want to join with others in studying the book at a neighborhood fellowship. Well, the manner in which we are going to present this introduction and overview to the book of Zechariah is as follows. We want to think of it, first of all, in the context of or from the angle of God's discouraged people. The book was written for the people of God. Certainly, the prophecies were delivered for the people of God. And they were, I think we can fairly describe them as God's discouraged people. And as we think of them, who they were and the circumstances they were in, what that will do, I think, is give us a helpful historical background. Why were they discouraged? What were their circumstances that led them to being discouraged? So, first of all, then we'll think of God's discouraged people to whom Zechariah ministers and to whom his prophecies are directed. But then, very briefly, we'll think about and identify God's encouraging messenger.

Of course, this is Zechariah, and we'll just say something about him and the impact that he had on his original audience. So, God's discouraged people, God's encouraging messenger, but then God's encouraging message. And there, our desire is to try and get a handle on the message of the book as a whole.

[4 : 29] What is the message of the book of Zechariah in the measure that it's possible to summarize it or synthesize it in just a few words? Well, we'll see how we get on by following this order. First of all, then, God's discouraged people. As I mentioned a moment ago, as we think of

this, it will serve as a historical introduction. And the way we're going to do it is we're going to subdivide what we have to say about God's discouraged people in three. We're going to think about a returning people. We're going to think about a loyal people, and then move on and mention what we've already mentioned, a discouraged people. The overall heading is a discouraged people, but we'll subdivide it in that way. A returning people, a loyal people, and then finally, a discouraged people. First of all, then, why do we describe the people to whom Zechariah was ministering, to whom he was bringing the prophecies that are contained in the book of Zechariah? Why do we describe them as a returning people?

Well, this is, if you wish, the good part of the story as far as the people are concerned. Zechariah was written for the Israelites who had returned from exile in Babylon. Those of you who have been, who have had the opportunity to hear some of the sermons that we've been preaching in the past few weeks from the prophets will, I hope, be a little familiar. No doubt you were already familiar, but that gave you another opportunity to become familiar or remind you of that period in history, leading up to the exile, the exile to Babylon, and now we are going to be thinking of the return from Babylon. So, I think for many there is at least some familiarity with that period in the history of God's people. So, we won't go into great detail, but there are significant, very significant events and dates that it's good to have in mind as we talk about this discouraged people, and especially this first aspect of it, a returning people. A key date in this period is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and the subsequent exile to Babylon of God's people. There had, of course, been Jews who had already been exiled to Babylon prior to 586 B.C., but this is the most central, tragic, but central event in this period. And that exile in Babylon, as we've noticed on previous occasions, God decreed would be for seventy years. Their exile, though as a result of defeat by pagan enemies and kings, was God's decree. It was God who had ordered world events that His people would be judged in this way and would be sent into exile in Babylon. But then in 536 B.C., there was a remarkable development in world history. It had a very significant impact on the Jews particularly, but at the level of world history at that time, it was a remarkable development because it was in 536 B.C. that Cyrus, of whom we've read in Ezra chapter 1, Cyrus, the king of Persia, conquers Babylon. The Persian kingdom had already been extending in every direction. It was already a massive kingdom, and as it were, the final major victory that was outstanding was Babylon. And in 536, they conquered Babylon. It was largely a bloodless conquest because the forces of Persia were so overwhelming that they were able to simply come in and take over in Babylon. Some say much to the relief of the very Babylonians who were well fed up of those who had been governing them. Now, why is that particularly significant for the Jews? Well, it was particularly significant for the Jews and for the exiles in Babylon because Cyrus, a pagan king, then decrees that the Jews could return to Jerusalem. And we read of that decree. We read the content of the decree in Ezra chapter 1. And as you read the decree, you might imagine if you didn't have other background information, well, this is some godly Israelite king who is speaking. But no, this was a pagan king, Cyrus, chosen by God, used of God to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. The exile had come to an end, and they were free to return, not only free to return, but were helped to return by Cyrus, as we read there in Ezra chapter 1. Not only to return, but given instructions to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Can you imagine how the Jews must have felt at such an astonishing turn of events in their favor? Here we have a pagan king showing a greater interest in the people of God, and even the worship of God than many of their own kings had shown in the preceding couple of hundred years. And the words of Psalm 126 capture the mood of the people, certainly of the pious Jews, better than a mere description of the events. We read the beginning of Psalm 126, when the Lord brought back the captives to Zion. We were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, the Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. So a returning people, a rejoicing people, an expectant people. And as they made their way from Babylon to Jerusalem, you can only but imagine the sense of excitement and expectation as they approached Jerusalem. This was, in a very real way, a new exodus as God's people through the wilderness returned to Jerusalem. The promised land awaited them, and no doubt many of them, as they approached Jerusalem, dreamt of a return to the golden era of David and Solomon. Yes, even such an age, could be recaptured on their return to Jerusalem, especially the manner in which God had facilitated the return, such a miraculous manner. Surely there was much that they could be excited about, a returning people. But even as we endeavor to capture some of the mood of the returning exiles, we

do have to recognize that there is a note of caution. And I would invite you, if you turn to Zechariah now, we're not going to be focusing on any one particular text, but it will be helpful just to have your Bibles open in Zechariah right at the end of the Old Testament. And I'll give you the page reference just in a moment. 950, page 950 is where the book of Zechariah begins. And there at the beginning of the book of Zechariah, there is a note of caution that God brings into the situation for the returnees. We read there at the beginning of the book in verse 3, Return to me, declares the Lord Almighty, and I will return to you. Now, these are words that perhaps some of you are familiar with, and they're words that even considered in isolation carry an important message. But when we understand when the words were directed to the people and the context in which they were directed, they take on a whole new meaning. There is a play on words or a play on the situation. God is saying, yes, you've returned to Jerusalem, and that's great. You're rejoicing that you've returned home, and that's wonderful. But take care of greater importance than returning to the physical city of Jerusalem is that you would return to me. God is saying to them, yes, I am providing for your return. I'm facilitating your return. I'm opening a highway in the desert that you would return, but return to me. Return to me first and foremost. So, a returning people, but also we can speak of these people as a loyal people. The call to return to the Lord that we've just noticed makes very evident that the returning exiles were far from perfect, and none of us are, of course, even close to being perfect. But I think we can say of the returning exiles that they were, in significant measure, a loyal people. There are a couple of pieces of evidence that would allow us to come to this conclusion. One evidence or one piece of evidence, which may seem a peculiar one but is an important one, is that they were returning at all. One might imagine that when Cyrus decrees that the Jews can return to Jerusalem, that all of the Jewish population in Babylon would have rejoiced and returned en masse. But that is not what happened. The vast majority of Jews remained in Babylon, and they remained in Babylon because they were doing very well, thank you. They were comfortable in Babylon. Decades had passed. They'd had children in Babylon. They'd settled in Babylon.

[14:41] They had, many of them, integrated and been assimilated into the culture and the city there in Babylon. And the prospect of a return to the ruins of Jerusalem was not attractive at all. But for the pious Jews, for the Jews who remained committed to the Lord, for the Jews who remained committed to Zion and to the welfare of Zion, they were prepared to return, even though there was hardship that would await them. And so, the very fact that they are returning is an important piece of evidence that allows us to conclude that they were a loyal people. But also, we are told very explicitly in Ezra, where you have the historical background, that the Jews who returned, it would seem, had been cured once and for all during the exile of the gross idolatry that their forefathers had been guilty of. We know when we study the history of the people of God prior to the exile, be it the northern kingdom or the southern kingdom, and we read through the book of Kings and Chronicles, and we read of how even the kings, and sometimes especially the kings would lead the people astray into idolatry. They would build altars in the high places and bow before the Baals and the Ashteroths, and we're familiar with that very sorry picture. Well, the people who returned from Babylon are no longer guilty of such idolatry.

We read nothing of that kind of gross idolatry in the lives and in the behavior of the returnees. And in that regard, I think we can legitimately call them a loyal people. A loyal people. So, given what we've said thus far, try and place yourself in their situation. Here we have a returning people and all the excitement that would accompany such a return. We have that combined with the fact that these are a people who are loyal to God and whose heart is in the right place. Surely, this is a recipe for success and prosperity. But that takes us on to what we also want to say about these people, that they are a discouraged people. Why a discouraged people? Well, things don't go according to plan, despite a promising start. Soon after their return to Jerusalem, the foundations of the temple were laid. The temple were laid. That can be dated to 534 B.C. The background to this or the texts that would substantiate this are in Ezra. We're not going to read them because time doesn't allow.

But there, soon after their return, almost immediately on their return, the foundations of the temple are laid, as I say, in 534 B.C. But the next we know of progress in the building of the temple is until fourteen years later. And it is in the book of Haggai, which immediately precedes Zechariah, that we have that next installment, as it were, of progress. And it is not an encouraging report at all.

[17 : 56] In the fourteen years that have passed, from their return to when Haggai begins his ministry, nothing has happened in terms of the construction of the temple. It's at a standstill. The temple remains in ruins. We read of that. We can just notice in Haggai, very, very briefly, in verse 2 of Haggai chapter 1. It's just a page before Zechariah begins. This is what the Lord Almighty says.

These people say the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. And Haggai goes on. So, the years have passed, and things haven't moved on as the people would have hoped or expected.

Now, why was this? Why was there no progress? Well, there are a couple of reasons we can identify. There was certainly external opposition. But Haggai also identifies the failings of the returnees themselves. Again, if we just turn to Haggai in chapter 1, and in verse 9, we read, you expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home I blew away.

Why? declares the Lord Almighty. Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Yes, they were a loyal people. Their heart was in the right place. They were not bowing before idols or guilty of gross immorality, but for a project as challenging as the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and especially the temple, they fall short. Maybe they were waiting for God to miraculously step in and do it all for them. But it is clear is that they were not prepared to make the necessary sacrifices. They were busy building their own houses and providing for their own families to dedicate the time that was needed for the temple to be built.

I'm not going to dwell on the applications to our own lives. Some of them, I think, are so evident. I hope they're so evident that we can draw them for ourselves. We can certainly, I think, relate to the people of God in Zechariah's day, perhaps more so than we can relate to the people of God in times of gross idolatry and apostasy. I think we can say humbly and gratefully that by God's grace, we as the people of God are not guilty of gross idolatry, notwithstanding Calvin's, I think, perceptive assertion that the human mind is a perpetual forge of idols. But notwithstanding that truth, I think we can say that we are not guilty of gross idolatry, nor by God's grace are we on the road to apostasy. As a church, we sincerely, if fallibly, endeavor to be loyal to the Lord and His Word. But like God's people in Zechariah's day, we are sometimes discouraged. Do you sometimes look at your own life or the life of the congregation that you form a part of this congregation and sometimes ask, is this it? Is this all there is?

[21 : 05] Are you sometimes disheartened at the seemingly modest evidence of the work of God in our midst? And if so, well, you can identify with the returnees and find in Zechariah a message that is suitable for you. God's discouraged people. But then, much more briefly, we are introduced to God's encouraging messenger. God loves His people, and He delights in encouraging His people. The manner in which He does so for the returnees from Babylon is by calling Zechariah and Haggai as prophets amongst them. And the encouragement that Zechariah brings is, as we will see, encouragement that derives from appreciating God's big plan that extends into the distant future. That is the way in which the people are encouraged. Zechariah comes and says, yes, things are not looking great now, but this is not as they will always be. Look beyond your immediate circumstances. Look at what God has planned for the future and be encouraged. But it's not only a message of a bright but distant future. If it were, the people might reasonably protest, as we might protest in those circumstances. What about us?

And what about today? But there is, in the message and in the ministry of Zechariah, encouragement for the here and now, for the here and now of His own day, and as we apply it to ourselves. Now, we discover this to be so in the manner the circumstances of the people did turn around, certainly in the short to medium turn, thanks to the ministry of challenge and encouragement of Zechariah and of Haggai, his contemporary, who also was called by God as a prophet. In 520 B.C., fourteen years after the foundations were laid, the temple was in ruins. We noticed that in speaking of a discouraged people. But five years later, by 515 B.C., the temple had been built. And why this dramatic turnaround? Well, the reason for that turnaround is given to us in the book of Ezra. For this, it probably would be helpful just to quickly notice what we read in Ezra chapter 6 from verse 14. There we read, "...so the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month, Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. Then the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles celebrated the dedication of the house of God with

joy." The turnaround is directly accompanied by or influenced by the ministry of Zechariah and Haggai, a discouraged people. But God lifts up these two men to challenge them, yes, but to encourage them. And they are encouraged, and this was a time really of national revival, perhaps relatively short-lived, but genuine and profound. And the people in their own day were encouraged by Zechariah and his ministry.

Like the people of God in Zechariah's day, we can and should look forward in expectation to future blessing. But we can and should expect and work for God's present blessing also. And that takes us finally to God's encouraging message. The book of Zechariah provides very little of the historical background, but rather the book relates the message of God for His people delivered by Zechariah. And the book is full of gems, but it's not a simple book. It's not a simple book to read through and understand fully. Jerome, who is best known as the man responsible for translating the Bible into Latin, the version known as the Vulgate, he speaks of the book of Zechariah in the Latin that he was most familiar with as *obscurissimus*, which roughly translated means seriously obscure. That's what he thought of Zechariah. But he says something else which is interesting and helpful for us. He says this concerning the book of Zechariah, we can direct our blind footsteps by the thread of Christ.

[25 : 55] And really what Jerome was saying was, yes, there is much that is difficult to understand, but there's a thread. There's a thread through the book, and it's the thread of Christ. There is a messianic thread that if we can lay hold of the thread and follow the thread, then there is much profit to be gained, much encouragement to be gained. For the book of Zechariah Zechariah is full of Jesus. Some of the prophetic references are explicit and quoted directly in the New Testament. And we'll notice one or two just in a moment. But if we had to summarize the messianic message of Zechariah, I think it would include the following intimately connected elements.

There is, throughout the book, the promise of a restored kingdom. The people were discouraged. They were back in Jerusalem. That was good. But the temple was in ruins. The walls were in ruins. The city had not been rebuilt. Even when the temple was rebuilt, it was a far cry from previous times, a far cry, certainly from the days of David and Solomon. And in Zechariah, there is this promise of a restored kingdom. But there's also, and of course these things go together, the promise of a messianic king. Every king or every kingdom needs a king. And within the book of Zechariah, there is this thread that points to a king who will come, a messianic king. And there's a description of the king and of his work. And then, finally, a connected element is that the promise, the message is of a universal kingdom, a kingdom way beyond what even the Jews might have imagined or hoped for. For the language of Zechariah is the language of a universal kingdom. These elements we find as we read through the book and study through the book of Zechariah. And to close, to draw things to a close, what I want to do is to read almost without commentary. I can't promise that there won't be any commentary, but to read almost without commentary key verses throughout the book. The thread of Christ, if you wish, or in any case, points along the thread. If we were to try and identify all of the thread, it would take far too long, but points along that thread that I hope will illustrate these elements of Zechariah's message, his encouraging message. We begin in chapter 1 and verse 17. What do we read? This is what the Lord Almighty says, My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem. The promise for a discouraged people of a restored kingdom. But then the question might arise. But why will the Lord restore His people? And what do we read in verse 8 of chapter 2?

Beautiful words. And we limit ourselves just to one phrase within the verse, Whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye. This is why God will restore His people, because He loves His people.

[29 : 04] His people are the apple of His eye. This is what motivates God to restore His people and to promise restoration. And we move on to chapter 3 and in verse 8, and we read these stirring words, this promise, and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. It's a wonderful and encouraging promise, but one that begs the question, how in a single day can the sin of the land be removed? And of course, in the light of Jesus, we know the answer. We know how in a single day the Messianic King died on Calvary, and in a single day the sin of the land was dealt with. We move on to chapter 4 and verse 6, and we read familiar words. Maybe we don't realize that they come from Zechariah, not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty. A reminder of how God will restore and build this kingdom. Not by armies, not by might, not by power, certainly not in the terms conceived of by men, but by my Spirit.

That is how I will build my kingdom, and that is how He continues to build His kingdom. We move to chapter 6, and we read in verse 12, here is the man whose name is the branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. Another pointer to the coming King, which picks up on the language of the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke of a righteous branch from David's line. We move on to chapter 8, and in verse 23 we read, this is what the Lord Almighty says, in those days, in these future days that Zechariah is speaking of, in those days ten men 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. It's a very exciting picture of the nations seeking out the God of Israel as a universal kingdom is established. Chapter 9 and verse 9, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Familiar words, the King of this restored and universal kingdom. Who is He? Well, He's King Jesus. Chapter 12 and verse 10, And I will pour out in the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a 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 a firstborn son. Now, we don't know what the original discouraged people in Jerusalem would have made of this aspect of Zechariah's prophecy, but we can say this, that it is to this passage that John turns and identifies the one who is pierced as the Messiah.

In John chapter 19 and verse 37, we see how John identifies Jesus as the one who fulfills this language of one who would be pierced. So, Zechariah points not only to the identity of the Messiah, but also to the Messiah as one who would die in the place of others pierced for our transgressions. In the following chapter, in chapter 13 and verse 7, language again that we are able to find in the New Testament, strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. And we know how Jesus applies this passage from Zechariah to Himself and His disciples when He is arrested and His disciples are scattered in fear. And then to close in chapter 14 and in verse 9, the Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord and His name, the only name. And so, in a glorious way, there is this picture painted of this universal kingdom that will cover the whole world, where there will be one Lord and His name, the only name. And so, in Zechariah, even in this very haphazard way, you might say, we can follow through this thread of Christ that Jerome spoke of, I think, very helpfully. And I would encourage you, as we would turn to Zechariah in a more careful way, week by week or fortnight by fortnight, that we would do so with that excitement and expectation that in this book, we will see Jesus. We will be able to follow that thread, and as we follow that thread, be encouraged. Yes, they were a discouraged people, as we can often be a discouraged people.

But God raised up for them an encouraging messenger. But most importantly of all, He gave them an encouraging message, an encouraging message for them, and an encouraging message also for us. Let us pray.

Amen.