

Visions of Hope (Zechariah)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Zechariah 1, 2, Rom. 15:9–18, Eph. 3:1–8, Zechariah 3, 4, Exod. 25:31–40, Zechariah 7.*

Memory Text: “ “In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree,” declares the LORD Almighty’ ” (*Zechariah 3:10, NIV*).

Key Thought: Though Israel had been punished for its sins, it was time for its people to live again in relationship with God according to His promises.

On the wall of an old castle in central Europe a short Latin inscription reads: “*Dum spiro, spero!*” It means, “As long as I breathe, I have hope!” This saying can summarize the message of Zechariah to God’s people. Nearly twenty years after their return from the Babylonian captivity, some began to wonder if God was still present among His people. They started to feel discouragement replace their earlier enthusiasm.

Zechariah, whose name means “the Lord remembers,” began his prophetic ministry a few months after Haggai began his ministry (*Hag. 1:1, Zech. 1:1*). Through a series of prophetic visions, Zechariah learned God’s plans for the present and the future. God’s eternal kingdom was coming soon, but the prophet called those who lived in his time to serve the Lord now. A good portion of the book is centered on how they were to do just that. This week, and the next, we will look at what the Lord has revealed to us through Zechariah.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 15.*

Comforting Words of Life

Read Zechariah 1. What is the essential message here? Focus especially on Zechariah 1:3. What is the Lord saying to the people?

The return from the exile in Babylon sparked joy in the hearts of the remnant people. But the return also caused anxiety. Would they be safe and secure in their land, or would enemies come again to harass them? Had God forgiven their past unfaithfulness, or would He continue their punishment? What did the future hold for God's chosen people and for the nations?

In his vision, Zechariah saw the angel of the Lord move to intercede for Judah. He began with the question, "How long?" In the Bible, this question often is used as an expression of people's distress and appeal to the Lord for help (*Ps. 74:10, Isa. 6:11, Dan. 8:13*). The answer to the question came directly through the interpreting angel, who then passed it on to the prophet. It contained words that promised God's kindness and comfort.

Zechariah was told to proclaim that their Lord was very jealous for Jerusalem (*Zech. 1:14*). Jealousy can have negative connotations, but in the Bible it also can be an expression of God's love. God loved His people and expected them to be faithful. In contrast to His love toward Jerusalem, the angel said that the Lord was angry with the nations that had treated His people so harshly. The full charge against the nations was that they had added to the calamity of the divine discipline by going too far in their harsh treatment of captives.

Zechariah 1:15–17 acknowledges God as having been angry, but shows also that He promised to repay the people with comfort. His purpose, which the prophet was commissioned to proclaim, was to return to Jerusalem with compassion. The Lord would comfort Zion (*see Isa. 40:1*) while His anger would be directed to His enemies. Jerusalem was going to be restored, and it would again be the dwelling place of the Lord.

Look again at Zechariah 1:3. How does one "return" (NIV) unto the Lord? In what ways is this a call for a restored personal relationship between God and His people? How do we (or do we?) "return" unto the Lord every day?

The Lord Is Coming

Read Zechariah 2. It records a vision in which the prophet is shown a renewed Jerusalem, so full of people that it overspreads its walls. It will attract countless Gentiles as well, which must have sounded very strange to the people. Verse 10 begins with a call to joy, followed by the reason for such jubilation: the personal coming of the Lord to live among His people.

The Lord's dramatic return to dwell in His rebuilt house is cause for praise for those who have returned from exile. Zion, the dwelling place of the great King, is called "Daughter of Zion," a prophetic term of endearment. In view of its glorious prospect, Zion is invited to rejoice because the Lord Himself will take care of its people. Anyone who touches God's people touches the pupil of His own eye (*vs. 8*).

The prophet said that in the day of the Lord, many non-Hebrew nations will come and join themselves to the Lord's covenant. God's original plan was that the people of the surrounding nations would see how Israel's service to the true God results in blessings and prosperity; thus, they would be led to join themselves to the Lord. In this way the remnant of Israel and the believing Gentiles would together become one people, in whose midst the Lord Himself would dwell. This event would fulfill God's promise to Abram and Sarai that through their posterity, all the nations of the world would be blessed (*Gen. 12:1-3*).

How was this prophecy to be fulfilled? (*Rom. 15:9-18, Eph. 3:1-8*).

Through Zechariah's prophecy, God promises not the destruction of the nations but their inclusion among God's covenant people. The promised future is the result of God's own initiative and was the longing of many biblical prophets. Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news to the whole world of the salvation that is to be found for everyone in Jesus, if they accept it for themselves. The apostle Paul called this plan of the Lord "the mystery hidden for long ages past" (*Rom. 16:25, NIV*).

How should our understanding of the universality of the gospel message, and the idea that it is for all humanity, impact how we live; that is, how much of our lives, our time, and our thoughts should be focused on reaching the world with the wonderful truths that we have been given?

God's Readiness to Forgive

Read Zechariah 3. How is the gospel portrayed here?

With perhaps the exception of Isaiah 53, no portion of the Old Testament better reveals the wonderful truth of salvation by faith alone than does Zechariah 3. In this vision, the high priest Joshua is being tried on accusations brought forth by the official accuser, Satan. The accusations against the high priest also apply to the nation which he represented. The name *Joshua* (also spelled as *Jeshua*) means “the Lord saves” (see *Matt. 1:21*) and can also be spelled *Jesus*.

In the Bible, the position of standing on the right side is one of defense and protection. The psalmist says, “I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken” (*Ps. 16:8, NIV*; see also *Ps. 44:3*). In this case, the accuser is doing just the opposite (*Ps. 109:6*). While Joshua is interceding before God for the people, Satan is bringing accusations against them based on their sinfulness.

The Lord rejects the accusations, reminding the accuser that in His mercy He already has chosen Joshua. Moreover, His people already have suffered the full measure of divine punishment. Joshua and the remnant people have been snatched as a burning stick from the destructive fire (*Amos 4:11*) of long captivity in Babylon.

At the command of the angel of the Lord, Joshua’s clothes, which represent people’s sins, are removed. He is cleansed and then given the new festive garments of salvation and righteousness.

Finally, Joshua is commissioned to do God’s will and to walk in His ways, an attitude that will result in God’s manifold blessings.

“The high priest cannot defend himself or his people from Satan’s accusations. He does not claim that Israel is free from fault. In filthy garments, symbolizing the sins of the people, which he bears as their representative, he stands before the Angel, confessing their guilt, yet pointing to their repentance and humiliation, and relying upon the mercy of a sin-pardoning Redeemer. In faith he claims the promises of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 583, 584. Those promises, of course, include the covering of Christ’s righteousness.

Imagine having to stand before God in your own “filthy garments.” What great hope is presented here, and how can you not only claim that hope for yourself but reveal the reality of that hope through a holy and sanctified life?

Not by Human Power

Read Zechariah 4. What hope is being presented to the people?

In this vision, Zechariah sees a lampstand fed by two olive trees, which refers back to the candlestick located in the Holy Place of the wilderness tabernacle (*Exod. 25:31–40*). The seven lamps are arranged around a large bowl that serves as a reservoir of oil.

The bowl, with its bountiful supply of oil, symbolizes the fullness of God’s power through His Spirit. The seven lamps shine with abundant light, a symbol of God’s abiding presence, which dispels all darkness. Just as the olive oil is conducted directly from the trees to the bowl of oil at the top of the lampstand without any human agency, so the power which comes from God is constant and sufficient and also needs no human agency.

The message of the vision given to the prophet is that the temple in Jerusalem will soon be rebuilt. God’s Spirit, not just human efforts, guarantees the completion of the work. This bold message is given in spite of the fact that the obstacles faced by the builders appear to be as great as a “mountain” (*vs. 7*).

The prophet is not told who is represented by the lampstand, but we can be sure that the two olive trees represent the two leaders of Judah, Joshua and Zerubbabel. In worldly terms, Zerubbabel’s position never could match the royal power and might of his ancestors David and Solomon. From a human point of view, all efforts and resources available to the builders were inadequate. Yet, God’s Word promises that a king is not saved by the size of his army, nor a warrior by his great strength (*Ps. 33:16*). In this way the leaders are told that it is only when the Spirit leads that every detail of service can glorify God.

In this prophetic passage, Christians are given an important principle to remember: God may call us to difficult tasks, but through the work of His Spirit, He can accomplish His purpose (*see Phil. 2:13, 4:13*). By the Spirit, God provides the power for us to do His work now as He did then. Therefore, the work is accomplished not by human might or force but by the Lord working through those who are open to be used by Him.

Read carefully Zechariah 4:6. Why is it so important always to keep in mind our utter dependence upon God? What can happen when we forget that all that we have, or can do, comes only from the Lord and His power working in us?

Beyond Fasting

During Zechariah's third year of ministry, a delegation from Bethel came to Jerusalem to ask the priests and the prophets a question (*see Zech. 7:1–3*). When they were in exile in Babylon, the people fasted during the fifth month to mourn the destruction of the temple (*2 Kings 25:8, 9*). This was in addition to the fasts held in the fourth, seventh, and the tenth months (*Zech. 8:19*). In the fourth month, the breaching of the wall of Jerusalem was remembered (*Jer. 39:2*). The fast in the seventh month, the Day of Atonement, was the only fasting day commanded by God through Moses (*see Leviticus 16*). Finally, in the tenth month, the people mourned the siege against Jerusalem (*Jer. 39:1*). Because the exile was now over and the temple reconstruction almost was complete, the people wondered if it still was necessary to fast in the fifth month.

Read the Lord's answer to them (*Zech. 7:8–14*). In what ways can the words here be applied to ourselves?

God's answer through Zechariah is twofold: first, it is necessary that God's people remember the past so that they do not repeat it. The Lord had warned the ancestors that He expected them to live in trust and obedience. The exile was punishment for their persistent rebellion. So, the people are summoned to learn from their past mistakes. Second, the Lord does not take delight in people's hunger. When they fast and humble themselves before God, repentance and humility need to be reflected in what they do. To fast in order to feel sorry for oneself is a waste of time and effort. Fasting, among other things, should represent the kind of death to self needed in order to be able to put self aside and reach out and minister to the needs of others. "The spirit of true fasting and prayer is the spirit which yields mind, heart, and will to God."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, p. 189.

What are ways in which we can make valid religious practices, such as fasting and even prayer, become substitutes for what true Christian faith should be about? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: “Satan knows that those who ask God for pardon and grace will obtain it; therefore he presents their sins before them to discourage them. Against those who are trying to obey God, he is constantly seeking occasion for complaint. Even their best and most acceptable service he seeks to make appear corrupt. By countless devices, the most subtle and the most cruel, he endeavors to secure their condemnation.

“In his own strength, man cannot meet the charges of the enemy. In sin-stained garments, confessing his guilt, he stands before God. But Jesus, our Advocate, presents an effectual plea in behalf of all who by repentance and faith have committed the keeping of their souls to Him. He pleads their cause, and by the mighty arguments of Calvary, vanquishes their accuser. His perfect obedience to God’s law has given Him all power in heaven and in earth, and He claims from His Father mercy and reconciliation for guilty man. To the accuser of His people He declares: ‘The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan. These are the purchase of My blood, brands plucked from the burning.’ And to those who rely on Him in faith, He gives the assurance, ‘Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.’ Zechariah 3:4.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 586, 587.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read the Ellen G. White statements above. How does this help us to understand the great truth, which is salvation by grace alone? In moments of great personal discouragement about our own faults and shortcomings, how can we draw comfort and hope from these words? How can we learn to make this wonderful truth a source of strength that helps us not to turn away from the Lord in utter despair over our own sense of unworthiness? Instead, how can we make this wonderful truth the source of our determination to continue to love God and to keep all of His commandments?
- 2 As a class, go over the final question in Thursday’s study. Why is that such an easy trap to fall into? At the same time, what potential dangers are there when we make our religion into nothing but a kind of social service? How do we strike the right balance?
- 3 However difficult some parts of the book of Zechariah may be (and some parts are difficult), what practical lessons about Christian living can you take from it?

Nothing to Lose

What's happened to me? Solomoni [sohl-oh-MOH-nee] asked himself. He was still a teenager, but he knew that he had messed up his life. He had disobeyed his parents and joined a gang of teenagers who stole and used drugs. *God has condemned me for what I've done*, he thought. *I'm lost. There's no hope for me; I have nothing to lose.* With this attitude, he continued living a life of crime. In time he was arrested and sent to prison. But prison didn't change him.

Solomoni had several dreams that haunted him. He recognized a woman in his dreams as a Seventh-day Adventist. He decided to visit the Seventh-day Adventist church to learn why God had sent the dreams. The members welcomed him warmly, unmindful of his torn shirt and dirty jeans. He sat down and focused on the sermon. He was sobered by the pastor's words and determined to leave his former life behind.

Some of Solomoni's old friends warned him about what would happen if he left his former life. "Do whatever you want to me," he told them. "I've found a better life in God." Solomoni realized that he had been given a second chance in life. God had never let him go, and he had nothing to lose by taking hold of God.

Solomoni's family and friends saw the changes in his life. Some wanted to know what had happened. Solomoni answered by inviting them to church, and several went. They knew that it would take a powerful God to change Solomoni, and they wanted to know God too. Three of Solomoni's former gang member friends were baptized with him.

The pastor saw potential in Solomoni and urged him to consider preparing for the ministry. But Solomoni hesitated. "God has done so much for me, and I want to work for Him," he said. "But with my past, I'm not worthy to be a pastor." He resisted as church members tried to encourage him to consider studying at Adventist-owned Fulton College. But eventually Solomoni recognized God's leading and enrolled to study theology.

He had no financial support, but he trusted God to provide. "I now know that God is calling me to serve Him, and I won't turn back," he says.

Hundreds of students are making a difference in the South Pacific islands thanks to Fulton College in Fiji. Part of a recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is helping to establish a new campus for the college where many more students can prepare to serve their Master. Thank you for your part in making this happen.