

Tim Cope, an Australian adventurer, travelled 10,000 kilometres on horseback, from one end of what was once the Mongolian Empire to the other. The Mongolian Empire, spanning from Mongolia to Hungary, was the largest empire ever established by one man, Ghengis Khan. It was founded by barbarism and held together by fear. Through his ruthlessness and single-mindedness, Ghengis Khan built an enormous empire. His final words to his sons were: "With Heaven's aid I have conquered for you a huge empire. But my life was too short to achieve the conquest of the world. That is left for you". Although his sons did expand the empire it never covered the whole earth. But in his prophecy, Zechariah speaks of a kingdom that will - God's kingdom.

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai whom we looked at last week. His prophecy is dated from the eighth month of the second year of Darius (King of Persia from 521-486 BC) - that is from October 520 BC, a date which coincided with the resumption of work on the rebuilt temple (Ezra 4:24). God had promised his servant David to provide a king to rule his people forever, on David's throne, to make them a blessing to the world. But would that promise ever be fulfilled through the group of exiles (God's remnant) who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and, as we saw from Haggai chapter 1 last week, seemed to be doing anything but putting God first?

Like Haggai, Zechariah has much to say about the rebuilding of the temple, but his concern is wider than Haggai's. Whereas Haggai deals with the resumption of the building and the blessings that will flow to God's people as a result of their obedience, Zechariah is more concerned with the establishment of God's kingdom and rule, which the temple signifies.

The movement of the book can be seen in 2 key verses in the first and last chapters. In chapter 1 the Lord God promises: "I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem" (1:16). The implications of this verse are far-reaching. Although the remnant has returned, at this stage Yahweh, God himself, has not yet returned. The returned exiles are reminded by Zechariah that they cannot take for granted that God will inhabit any temple they build. In chapters 8-11 of Ezekiel, the prophet made that clear when, after being confronted with the wickedness that was taking place within the temple, he saw the Lord God physically leave the temple and move off to the East. (Ezekiel 10:18; 11:22-23). In Zechariah, however, the returned exiles are being promised that if they turn from their sin and rebuild the temple, God will mercifully return to it and live among them. This promise sets the program for the whole book which concerns the building of the temple and the way the people must live with God in their midst.

Zechariah ends his prophecy with a much broader perspective than just Israel's future. In his final chapter we see that God's rule, symbolised by the temple, is a rule not just for the people of Jerusalem (and what was once Judah), but a rule which will take in the whole earth: "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). The scope of this vision is one which ultimately takes us to the heart of Zechariah's message, but also beyond it, as he points us throughout this prophecy to the one who will make the vision reality - the Branch, Zion's King, namely the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Zechariah chapters 1-6

Zechariah began his prophecy by reminding the people, the remnant, that the Lord was very angry with their forefathers. He called them to turn from their evil ways and return to him (1:1-6). The overall message of Zechariah would suggest that the remnant's specific sin was their failure to rebuild the temple. As we saw from Haggai last week, having returned to Jerusalem some time ago, they had ignored the temple reconstruction and put their own comfort and wellbeing first. God's call on Judah was to be holy and to

(Zechariah 3:1-10; 4:1-14; 9:9-17; 14:1-9; Matthew 21:1-11)

put him first. They had sinned by not doing that - by being just like the nations around them.

Chapters 1-6 consist of 8 visions given by God to Zechariah at night "on the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius" (1:7). The visions in this section relate to the building of the temple. In summary, the message is that God will return to Jerusalem with mercy and his house, the temple, will be rebuilt. The chosen leaders to accomplish this are Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel, from the line of David, the governor of Judah, whom we met in Haggai last week. God promises to equip them for the role, first by making Joshua clean: "Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes". Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you" (3:3-4). This symbolic cleansing of the sin of the people points forward to the coming of the Branch - the promised Messiah - who will remove the sin of his people "in a single day", surely Good Friday (3:8-9). Second God will equip Zerubbabel for the work of rebuilding by giving him the Spirit: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty" (4:6). These 2 gifts - cleansing from sin and the Holy Spirit - are the heart of God's salvation in Jesus Christ, aren't they?

There are several applications to come from this first part of Zechariah. First, as we do God's work obediently, we can be sure that he will deal decisively with those who oppose him. Zechariah's second vision (1:18-21) concerns 4 horns which are scattered by 4 craftsmen. In apocalyptic literature, horns represent powers - in the context of this book, the powers that are keeping the people from rebuilding the temple. When the craftsmen get on with the job of rebuilding the temple, the opposition is scattered. Satan will always try to stop God's people from doing God's work - I'm sure many of you have experienced that! Satan knows that when God's people work obediently his evil forces are scattered. Remember that the devil's power rests in our inactivity so be careful not to be distracted from the work God has given you.

Second, we need to be careful not to despise the day of small things (4:10). Some people thought that the work on the temple was insignificant when compared with the size and grandeur of Solomon's temple. Zechariah stresses, as did Haggai, that although this temple would not be as magnificent as the first one, yet it would be the place where Zion's long awaited King would come, inhabited by God himself. Great events in God's kingdom come about as God's people are faithful in building from the foundation up. From little things big things grow, as the advertisement of one of the big superannuation funds reminds us. God's kingdom will be big! It will take in the whole world! But, in the meantime, we must not despise the day of small things. Many people want to be part of something big. It is why big churches attract more people. But if, for example, people were willing to look beyond big high profile ministries and commit their spiritual gifts, their talents, their energies to small struggling churches, or to often slow and difficult cross cultural work, or to mission fields that have proved hard to evangelize, they would demonstrate a grasp of what Zechariah is speaking about. Are you prepared to do that?

Third, when God moves in, sin must move out. With God in their midst the people must be pure. This is the simple message and application of the two visions in Zechariah 5 - the vision of the flying scroll and the vision of the woman in a measuring basket. Indeed, in the final verse of chapter 5, God banishes sin from his people by sending it to Babylon (5:11). The grace of God in Christ "teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12). God is purifying us as his very own people.

2. Zechariah chapters 7-14

The second part of Zechariah takes place 2 years later, in the fourth year of Darius. Work on the temple was progressing well. People had been fasting regularly for the temple to

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be built but now that work was well under way, they wondered whether they needed to continue fasting. The people of Bethel sent a delegation to Zechariah asking if they should keep fasting. Zechariah's answer from the Lord comes in 4 parts. In 7:4-7, he asks the people, "When you fasted was it really for me? Was it not for yourselves?" and then he goes on in 7:8-14 to point out that the "fast" God requires is not to abstain from food, but from sin. We are reminded that religion that impresses God is inward, not outward. God sees and knows our heart - that is what he is concerned with. God was unimpressed with the fasting of the people of Bethel for the temple, because it was not primarily for him, but for themselves. He did not want them to stop eating, but to start living rightly - to honour and please him. Outward displays or traditions are not necessarily wrong but need to be regularly evaluated, because over time, they can tend to be carried out from habit rather than from a commitment to what God really requires. Chapter 8:1-17 is made up of 7 short oracles all introduced by the phrase, "This is what the Lord Almighty says". Each oracle speaks of ways in which God is going to transform Jerusalem by his presence - "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain" (8:3). Finally, in 8:18-23, Zechariah returns to the original question about fasting and points out that the fasting times will be replaced by glad and happy festivals. The pilgrims coming to ask about fasts will be replaced by pilgrims from all over the world who have heard that God dwells in Zion with his people.

The book concludes with two important oracles (9:1-14:21). The first oracle (Zechariah 9-11) focuses on the leadership of the renewed nation. After listing the surrounding nations opposed to God's people, such as the Arameans and Philistines, God assures them that if they look to him (9:1) in the midst of oppression he will care for them, because his eye is on them (9:8). Not only will God watch over his renewed people - he will also send his king to them (9:9). Unlike the normal king of the day who came riding a war-horse, this king will come "gentle and riding on a donkey". The image of Zion's King arriving on donkey (a lowly animal of peace) makes it clear that the Davidic king will not come as a military figure with violence and bloodshed, but rather with righteousness and salvation. The only blood that is shed will be his own (12:10ff). Matthew quotes Zechariah 9:9 as being fulfilled by Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now celebrate as Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter) (Matthew 21:1-5). The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day were blind to this dominant picture in Zechariah. They expected the Davidic king to come on his war-horse to establish the kingdom of God with violence rather than gentleness and sacrifice. The benefits of submitting to Zion's King are set out in 9:11-17. He will bring peace to the nations (v.10), free the prisoners (v.11), shield his people from attack and cause them to sparkle like jewels in his crown (v.16).

The problem of leadership is brought into even sharper focus in chapters 10 and 11. The Lord God is angry with the shepherds of Israel because they are false. As a result "the people wander like sheep oppressed for lack of a shepherd" (10:2). In response to his people's needs God promises to raise up a leader from Judah. The remainder of chapter 10 is full of expressions introduced by the phrase "I will", as God outlines his provision for them. The New Testament demonstrates the fulfilment of this, doesn't it, as we see Jesus the Good Shepherd, having compassion on the people, "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)?

Judah's response to God's leadership is prophesied in chapter 11. In vv.4-14 Zechariah is called to play the part of a good shepherd and portray events to be fulfilled in the coming rejection of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is to serve the people, be rejected by them, and then abandon them to the consequences of that rejection for a time. Then in vv.15-17 Zechariah is to assume the role of a wicked shepherd in anticipation of an additional judgment upon the nation.

The second and final oracle integrates the book's complex prophecies. The book ends with people from all nations coming to Jerusalem to worship the Lord Almighty - but since

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not all will worship willingly, war needs to precede this coming together in worship. Zechariah 12 and 13 deal with God's relationship with his own people, whereas Zechariah 14 deals with his relationship with the world. The oracle begins by stressing that Israel's God is the God who is the Creator, and as the oracle proceeds, it is clear he is also the God who will recreate his people. This process will involve him judging the nations that have opposed Jerusalem and also giving Israel the grace to mourn for the way they have treated the Lord by piercing him. Their tears will lead to a fountain of forgiveness - "On that day a fountain will be opened.....to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (13:1) and the renewal of the people, which finds its ultimate expression in 13:9 - "They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, "They are my people" and they will say, "The Lord is our God"". They will be restored to proper covenant relationship with the Lord their God.

Zechariah 14 pictures the final battle in which God stamps his supremacy on the nations. They will gather for war against Jerusalem but he will rescue his people. The Mount of Olives will be split in two (recalling the parting of the Red Sea) so that his people can escape. Then the Lord Almighty will come and usher in a day of never-ending light (perfection). Jerusalem will be established as the source of living water - that is, blessing - for the world. And so "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). Given the absolute certainty that the day is coming - the Day of the Lord - when God will be king of the whole earth, surely it is ultimate foolishness not to bow the knee to God's rule - to receive his gracious offer of salvation in Jesus and to live under the lordship of King Jesus. Zechariah makes clear the enormous implications of such folly. Those who do not bow the knee will come under God's judgment: their flesh will rot while they are still standing (14:12), the lands that do not submit will have no rain (14:17). But those who do submit will "sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown.....attractive and beautiful" (9:16-17).

The movement of this last oracle makes it clear that God's purpose in all his interventions in history is that the world might be consecrated to him, and worship him as it should. As the answer to the first question of the Shorter Catechism tell us, "The chief end of man (and of the world) is to glorify God and enjoy him forever". This is expressed in 14:16 where Zechariah prophesies: "Then 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 feast of Tabernacles". Our happiness and fulfilment are only complete when God brings us to worship him - which is the goal of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Let us embrace that salvation with joy!

Amen

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