

THE MESSIANIC PROPHECIES OF ZECHARIAH

The prophet Zechariah was part of the Jewish remnant return to Jerusalem after Persian King Cyrus initiated the exodus in 536 B.C. As many as 125,000 Jews returned home during three trips, led by Zerubbabel (536), Ezra (457) and Nehemiah (444). Zechariah (along with his fellow prophet, Haggai) was a part of the first return.

While Haggai encouraged the completing of the temple as priority for the Jews, Zechariah called for repentance and urged his people to develop a deeper level of spiritual discipline (1:1-6).

Zechariah's prophecy can be broken into two major segments. The first eight chapters mainly address the spiritual restoration of Judah. The remaining chapters (9-14) focus primarily on Israel and her Messiah. This emphasis was crucial to the survival of Israel at this stage in history. As they struggled with no king to re-establish their nation in a largely forgotten corner of the vast Persian empire—with little resources and clout—they needed reassuring and reminding of God's providential care and future plans among them. God remembered them. Not only that, his promise of a Messiah was still just in place. That glorious day was just over the horizon—all the more reason to accomplish their rebuilding tasks.

So as we ourselves are seasonally reminded of the birth of this Messiah and how it still impacts our world, let's consider Zechariah's prophecies about Christ.

The Branch (3:8; 6:12-13)

Zechariah would not be the first to use such an image. Isaiah spoke of a "branch" that would emerge from the lineage of Jesse (David's father—Isaiah 11:1-5). Jeremiah would also speak similarly concerning Jesus as "the righteous branch" who would reign as divine king (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

So Zechariah's use of this term (3:8) continued to confirm Christ's Messiahship. His more specific discussion in 6:12-13 made it even clearer. Here the branch is defined as man who will not only build the temple of God but sit on the throne and rule from there as both king and priest. Only Jesus fulfilled these words. We experience that now. For those in that backwater part of the world in Zechariah's time, they could only imagine, hope, and work to realize that day.

The Humble King (9:9)

This glimpse offered by Zechariah was fulfilled in the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem before Passover, his arrest and crucifixion (Luke 19:28-44). Of course, for us this idea is no longer radical, but for those in Zechariah's time, it was unthinkable that a king would ride something as humble as a donkey. This was Zechariah's message revealing the nature of their coming king and his kingdom. As Jesus would later say it "is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus took it upon himself to come in form of a man and empty himself on our behalf to accomplish the will of God—a king born in a manger.

His Betrayal (11:12-13)

In quite a remarkably specific prophecy this foresees the betrayal of Judas for thirty pieces of silver including referencing the potter's field (Matthew 26:14-16). These words were within a context projecting a terrible time for Jewish people (which many see as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The reason for this future devastation is Israel's rejection of God's true shepherd, Jesus, and his betrayal by one of his close disciples.

Mourning in Jerusalem (12:10-14)

Here Zechariah presents a picture of weeping and mourning in Jerusalem over "the one they have pierced." This mourning results from the realization that the one pierced was the true one sent from God—the Messiah. Along with this mourning, however, God would "pour out... a spirit of grace and supplication" over Israel—signifying his gift of atonement through Jesus and his favor in the forgiveness of sin.

Consider the situation after the death of Christ—the weeping and mourning over the loss of the Savior. But then consider the situation at Pentecost as thousands received the grace and supplication of God as their mourning turned into joy.

The Cleansing Fountain (13:1)

To further make this point, Zechariah foresees this cleansing from sin offered by Christ and describes it as a "fountain... to cleanse them from sin and impurity." The fountain symbolizes the shedding of blood of him who has been "pierced." It would be opened for all and as a fountain, supply freshness and forgiveness—a continual supply of the grace of God. What a blessed promise!

For those contemporary with Zechariah—this offered secure hope. It could empower them for their tasks. They were a part of something much larger than their moment, yet in their moment God needed them to accomplish his will as well. The same holds true for us. The difference is—we are now enjoying the steady flow of grace from the cleansing fountain of God.

The Slain Shepherd (13:7-9)

This is Zechariah's message of the Messiah being slain. It was Christ who took the fatal blow for our sin—took it all upon himself on the cross. As a result the sheep did scatter (see Matthew 26:31). Everyone did not (nor does not) follow him, but for those who do God declares, "They are my people" as they declare, "The Lord is our God."

This was and remains the goal of the slain shepherd—bringing as many as possible to come to know God in order to find cleansing in his fountain.

Zechariah's words were to provide encouragement to Israel in their task of rebuilding the temple, their nation and their spirituality. He also was sharing glimpses of a future time—when the promises of God would be fulfilled in Christ. While it was not to be realized by his contemporaries, it was none-the-less a message of hope for them—as it remains for us now. All of the gifts we share in Christ come as a result of the slain shepherd who turns our mourning into joy.