

## **God's Pleading Heart** **Zechariah 1:1-6**

One Saturday back in the 80s, I came home from cricket and the police were blocking off the main way into our street. I found a back way to get home – but soon after they came knocking at the door, telling us we had a few minutes to evacuate. About a kilometre away, a chemical factory was on fire and we had to get out. I'm not sure if they were worried it'd explode or if they were nervous about toxic fumes – but we had to go. What would you take with you in such a situation?

A few years later, we were living in Toongabbie when one of those "one in a hundred years" floods devastated the area. We lived on high ground – but not everyone in the church was so fortunate. After the flood-waters went down, a few of us went to help a lady whose house was on much lower ground. You could see the marks on the walls of where the water had been. All the carpets were ruined. Much of the furniture was now useless.

### **The Time of Zechariah**

Those things were minor compared to what happened to Israel in 587BC. That's when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. There'd been a long, drawn-out siege of the city. It'd been going on so long, there was nothing left to eat in the city. The Israelites were starving. That was the whole aim of sieges. Eventually the Babylonians broke through the walls and captured the city.

- A large number of the Israelites were taken to Babylon in exile. Certainly, all the cream of the leadership was deported.
- The city was looted and all the valuables were

taken to Babylon as well.

- The city walls were broken down.
- The temple was destroyed.
- Houses and buildings were burned to the ground.

They didn't have the chance to go through their houses and pick out the valuables they wanted to save. That's all taken from them.

Then we move forward nearly 70 years. Zechariah 1:1

*In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo:*

It's now 520BC. Quite a bit's happened. The Persians beat the Babylonians in 539BC. They began a new empire under Cyrus. They had a different foreign policy. Rather than keeping people away from their own lands, they encouraged them to return. Thus, they allowed the Jews to go back to Israel and Jerusalem. Quite a few of them did. By the time Zechariah writes, they'd been back in the land for over 15 years. But what was life like? What was Jerusalem like?

When they arrived, the place was in ruins. It'd be like coming back home after a bush-fire's destroyed your house and the surrounding area. It was a devastating mess. And things hadn't changed a great deal in the 15 years they'd been there. It was tough going. It's like they're still waiting for the insurance payout before they can get back on their feet – except it's all a result of an act of war and there's no payment coming.

Life was tough. If you turn back a couple of pages to Haggai, you can get something of the picture. Haggai 1:1 tells you that he gets this first part of his message from

God two months before Zechariah. Then look at verse 6:  
*You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.*

It's not a pretty picture.

### The Message of Zechariah

In that situation, God gives them two prophets: Haggai and Zechariah. Maybe there were more – but these are the two we know of.

- Haggai's job was to get them moving on rebuilding the temple. I understand you looked at him a couple of years ago.
- Zechariah's job is to encourage them in the midst of a difficult situation – to tell them of God's promises about what He's going to do for them in the future.

There are three major sections to the book.

- In the first six chapters, Zechariah's given eight visions about what God'll do. They paint a picture of a great future – when sin's forgiven and evil's removed and there's peace in the land.
- Chapters 7 and 8 deal with a question that's posed to the prophet: Should we still keep the fasts tied up with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple? The answer is that God will turn those fasts into feasts and joyful occasions of celebrating God's goodness.
- The final six chapters contain two oracles or burdens. They focus on the failure of the leadership and the failure of the people to recognise good leadership even when it's provided. Yet, they

promise that God will defeat all His enemies and He will set up His righteous kingdom under the rule of His righteous King.

We'll deal with each of those in more detail in the coming weeks.

But before that, there's this introductory paragraph that reminds them of their history. Why are they in the state they're in?

- Why have they suffered the exile? Why were they taken off as captives to Babylon? Why did God allow that?
- And now that they've returned from exile – now that they're facing the rebuilding task in the midst of all the ruins – what's the most important thing for them to hear?

It's all very well for God to make promises about the glorious future He's got for them – and they are magnificent promises God gives them through Zechariah – but did not the previous generations also have magnificent promises from God? And what happened to them? How do we know the same thing won't happen to us? It's important they learn the lessons of history. And, since this is part of God's word, it's important we also learn the lessons of their history.

### The Lessons of the Exile

Verse 2:

*The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Return to Me," declares the Lord Almighty, "and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the Lord*

*Almighty says: "Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices." But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord.*

Two major lessons in those verses.

**Lesson #1:** God was angry with the previous generations. Why? Because of their evil ways. What were their evil ways? Turn back to 2 Kings 17:7. This is what God said about the northern kingdom of Israel. These aren't the ones carried off by Babylon in 587BC – rather, these were the ones carried off by the Assyrians over 130 years earlier. But the southerners in Judah failed to learn from what happened to their northern neighbours, and they kept on with exactly the same sins. Pick it up at the end of verse 7:

*They worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the Lord had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that provoked the Lord to anger. They worshipped idols, though the Lord had said, "You shall not do this."*

Then look down to verse 18:

*So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from His presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel*

*had introduced. Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; He afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until He thrust them from His presence.*

You can find more of the details as you read through the rest of 2 Kings – especially chapter 21 – and as you read the various warnings of the prophets. The essence of their evil was that they rejected God. Back at Mount Sinai – at the time of Moses – they'd entered into a voluntary relationship with God which they expressed in terms of an agreement. God promised to be their God, they promised to be His people. They'd gone back on their word. Instead of continuing to trust God – instead of living on the basis of what God told them – they turned away from the real God and went chasing after all sorts of false gods. Instead of living as if they were God's people, they lived as if they were the people of other gods. Now, that led to all sorts of wicked behaviour in all the various areas of life – but the essence of their evil was that they rejected God Himself. They declared their independence from Him. They rebelled against Him.

God's response to this evil is anger. Some people get quite upset about the idea of God being angry. They say anger's wrong. They say God's a loving God. They say God would never stoop to such a base emotion. Indeed, they can get quite hot under the collar with those who suggest God does get angry. It's sheer hypocrisy.

- They think it's quite OK for them to be righteously indignant at those teaching God may get angry.
- But it's not OK for God to be righteously indignant at evil in His universe.

Who do they think they are? Why is it right for them to

get angry and not God? And who do they think they are telling God what is and is not permitted for Him?

God says quite clearly in the text that He was angry with their forefathers. He was angry at their evil. It's right that God be angry with evil. It's right that we be angry at evil. Evil is wrong. It's a dark stain on the goodness of God's creation. It's like a jarring note in the middle of a symphony – it doesn't belong; it spoils the music; the listener shudders at the discordant note. Why should we even dream to think that it's OK to stain the goodness of God's universe? And what could be a worse stain than rejecting the God who made it all – and the God who'd so graciously entered into relationship with them?

It's no different today. God remains angry at evil. Evil hasn't changed. God's reaction to it hasn't change. It remains a discordant note in the midst of the goodness of God's creation. God acts in judgment against it. Beyond the exile, there are two major ways in which God judges evil.

- The first is in His Son – Jesus. Jesus died to take the punishment for our evil. God placed our evil on Him and judged Him in our place. Because He took that judgment for us, God offers us forgiveness instead of judgment.
- The second is in His final judgment. Not everyone accepts what Jesus did for them. Some continue to reject God. They don't want to submit to His rule. They don't want to have Him as their God. In the long run, God will confirm that choice. He'll grant them their wish – life without Him forever. To some it sounds good – but God says it's a terrible judgment. The Bible calls it hell.

**Lesson #2:** It's foolish to reject God's warnings. Again, 2 Kings 17 provides more details. Verse 13:

*The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and seers: "Turn from your evil ways. Observe My commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through My servants the prophets. But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the Lord their God. They rejected His decrees and the covenant He had made with their fathers and the warnings He had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless.*

It wasn't a matter of one minor slip up and God sent them off into exile. It wasn't even a matter of one major slip up and God sent them away. This was something that went on for centuries – not just once, but over and over again. God had demonstrated incredible patience to them. They rejected God. God didn't come down with judgment straight away. He sent them a prophet to warn them – and then another prophet – and another one. You can read the warnings of some of them in the pages of the Old Testament. Sometimes, as we saw in Amos last year, He sent them warning judgments – withholding the rain, sending pestilence, that sort of thing. Sometimes it worked. They did turn back to God – for a while – but then they rejected Him all over again.

Finally, God had enough. He sent them into exile. The people Zechariah speaks to experienced that. They'd just come back from Babylon. They could still see the ruins of Jerusalem. The earlier generations didn't pay attention

to the warnings. They paid the price for that defiance.

Zechariah drives it home in verse 5:

*Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My decrees, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?*

In other words: What's ultimate reality? Who determines ultimate reality? Did the reality your forefathers believed in last? They thought they could set the rules themselves. They thought they could ignore Me. They thought they could chase false gods with impunity. They thought they could determine their own lifestyle and establish their own empire. What happened to them? Where are they now? I destroyed their version of reality. It's come to nothing.

But what lasts is God's word. God defines reality and God tells us what that reality is. Our job's to believe what He says – to base our lives on what He says life's all about. We're not to make up our own version of life and pretend that's reality – we're to listen to what God says about how He's made life to function and to conform our thinking and our lives to that.

This also remains the same today. God's final judgment has not yet come. That's fairly obvious because there's still evil in the world. God hasn't removed it yet. Why the delay? 2 Peter 3:3 tells us it's so people have the chance to repent. It's so people can hear God's warnings and pay attention to them and thus avoid the judgment.

### **The Current Danger**

For Zechariah – and for the people he speaks to – this

isn't just a recital of important bits of their history. This is a real challenge to them. They were in real danger of following the way of their forefathers. This is a serious warning.

God sent them back to the land with a purpose. They're His people – the people who made an agreement with God back at Mount Sinai. They're still to demonstrate to the nations what it means to be God's people. They're to re-establish Jerusalem as the centre of God's kingdom. God's to be at the centre of their lives. But they got side-tracked. It seems they faced too many difficulties.

- Conditions were tough.
- False accusations were made against them.
- People opposed the work.

Their good intentions were eroded by discouragement and frustration. The result? They gave up on kingdom work and just got on with their normal, everyday lives.

Zechariah challenges them to repent. Stop being just normal. Get on with the kingdom work. In the second half of verse 6, it seems there's a favourable response.

*Then they repented and said, "The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as He determined to do."*

However, there's some uncertainty as to who the "they" and "us" are in this verse.

- The NIV, by putting the paragraph in inverted commas, is saying that this is still God's message coming through the prophet Zechariah. In other words, the "they" refers to an earlier generation. Since the earlier verses say that generation did not repent before the exile came, this suggests the time

of their repentance was on their way to Babylon. Too late they realised that God was right and they were wrong – and they acknowledged the rightness of God's dealings with them. The ESV takes much the same approach.

- The other possibility is to treat this paragraph as the response of Zechariah's audience. They hear the warning Zechariah brings them and they pay attention to it. They acknowledge God was right to bring the exile. They commit themselves to not following the evil ways of their forefathers.

Whichever possibility you opt for, what we should note is this: This is always the right response to God's warnings.

- To acknowledge God is right and not us.
- To submit to what God says.

### **The God of the Exile**

So what should you and I take from a passage like this? I think here we see something of the heart of God. So far this morning we've concentrated on what may appear to be the negative.

- The anger of God.
- The judgment of God.
- The strong warning to turn.

They're all in the passage. They're all important.

But I think there's also something very positive in this passage: God desires relationship with His people. God doesn't want to be angry with His people. God doesn't want to judge them. He will do those things when it's necessary. But the overall impression this passage gives is of a God who wants to bless His people.

- He initiated relationship with them – even at a time

when they showed no interest in Him.

- He gave them His word – He didn't leave them in the dark but told them how He'd made life to be lived.
- He sent them prophet after prophet – not because He enjoyed telling them off, but because He wanted them to benefit from doing the right thing.
- Even now, as they've returned from the exile, He pleads with them to honour their relationship with Him. He wants them to do the right thing. He wants them to see the exile as a wake-up call.

Yes, He wants them to get on with their lives in the land He's given them. Yes, He wants them to rebuild the temple. Yes, He's got lots of promises to make to them. But the thing that's of first priority as they survey the ruins of Jerusalem is that they be in right relationship with Himself. That's what's most important. He wants them to return to Him, so He can return to them. He wants them to be His people, so He can be their God.

That's what God's like. And, this side of the cross, that should be even more obvious. He wants us to be in right relationship with Him. He doesn't want to destroy us – rather, He wants to pour out on us the blessings of His perfect kingdom. What's He done for us to make this possible?

- He's sent His Son – Jesus – to die in our place. We deserved judgment for our evil – but God punished Jesus in our place. Jesus was judged instead of us.
- He's given us His Spirit to dwell within us – to change us into the sort of people who can live in His kingdom. He wants to help us live in a way that pleases Him, rather than continue on in the evil we've been doing.

God's eager for relationship. Isn't that what permeates this passage? He wants to be in right relationship with His people – in living relationship with His people. Not simply a figurehead they pay lip-service to – but the One at the very centre of their lives, around whom their lives revolve. His people aren't just to be normal – just to be like everyone else. They're to be different – distinctive in how they live.

Is that how your life looks day by day? Do you think about it as you move through the various activities of your life?

- Does what you do and how you do it reflect the fact that you're His person?
- Do you think about what He wants you to do in each situation?
- Do you pray about the things that will come up?
- Do you ask God for wisdom in dealing with life? Do you ask Him for strength and patience?
- Do you ask Him for help with problems?
- Do you turn to Him when faced with temptation?
- Or is your trust in other gods – the security of money; the comfort of western lifestyle?

God's with you and wants to be involved in your life. He wants to be your God.

God's still angry at evil. Don't let these extraordinary things – the death of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit – make you think otherwise. This whole passage is a plea for Israel to turn away from evil. The New Testament takes up the same plea in relation to people today. God really wants you in relationship with Him, but it can only be on the basis of turning away from evil – especially the

evil of rejecting Him as God. You can't hang onto evil and expect God to accept you. God will judge your evil – either in Jesus or in your eternal destruction.

It's a terrible thing to lose everything in a house fire – to come back to your home and find an empty block of land with a few charred remains. The exile was a terrible thing for Israel – to come back to Jerusalem and find utter destruction; to have to start building all over again. But what would have been even more terrible would be for them to miss the lessons of the exile – to live in the rebuilt Jerusalem and continue to reject God; to fail to turn from the evil ways of their forefathers; to fail to live for God's kingdom.

What would be terrible for us would be to get to the end of life and find all we hold valuable in life – the normal things we've lived for while failing to pursue seriously God's kingdom – that these things are simply burned up in the fires of God's judgment. God pleads with us to give up our version of reality and to trust His – to treat Him as God and to submit to His word and to follow His purposes and priorities. Will we do that?