

## **God's Plans for Jerusalem** **Zechariah 1:7-2:13**

What do you think about George Bush's war on terror? When he first announced it, there was fairly widespread support in the United States. September 11 was very recent history. Americans were angry. They wanted to strike back at someone. But, as time goes on, so the support for this war seems to diminish – if the opinion polls are to be believed. Why?

- Some think responding in this way only promotes more terrorism.
- Some still agree with the concept but disagree with the way George Bush has gone about it.
- Some think George Bush has used it as an excuse to hide his real motives for doing some things.
- Some worry about the cost in terms of the lives of American soldiers. The cost's too high.
- Some worry about the cost in terms of American tax dollars.

It's a complex issue. I certainly don't understand all there is to understand about it. Yet, it seems to me, the longer it drags on without there being any V-Day, the greater the opposition to it.

What do you think about God's war on His enemies? It too seems to drag on and on. It seems like it's not moving towards any resolution. God's enemies still seem to have the upper hand. They're prospering. How do you react to that? Tempted to think God's got it wrong? Tempted to think God's using the wrong tactics? Maybe tempted to think the personal cost's too high? How do you think God's people reacted to it? They had great promises from God – but, as they looked at the ruins of Jerusalem, did

they wonder about the reality of those promises? And, as time ticked by and nothing seemed to happen, did they give up on what God was doing?

### **Introduction to the Visions**

Zechariah 1:7 begins a new section of the book. You can see that by the new time reference:

*On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius ...*

A couple of months have passed since Zechariah got his first message.

But you can see this is a new section also by the change in the nature of the material. Verses 1 to 6 are a straightforward message. This is what God says. But from 1:7 onwards, we get a series of 8 visions. Each of the visions follows much the same pattern.

- Zechariah is shown something.
- Zechariah asks a question about what he's shown.
- An angel answers Zechariah's question.

Now, these visions belong together. It seems likely Zechariah had all the visions in the one night. If you look at the first and last visions, they both have four horses in them – they seem linked. The eight visions provide an overall promise to Israel of what God'll do for them. However, we're going to spend three weeks thinking about them: three visions this week, two the next week and three the following week.

But, if they belong together, why am I splitting them up? I had to find some way to make Zechariah last the whole term. No, no – that's not the reason. Two main reasons:

- First, these visions seem to me to be part of apoca-

lyptic literature – or, if they're not true apocalyptic literature, they're fairly close. The best example of apocalyptic literature we know about is Revelation – and we all know how difficult it is to understand. One of the reasons is we're not used to apocalyptic literature – it's not the stuff we read everyday. We read newspapers and novels and reference books, but not apocalypses. So, we struggle with getting the meaning of this sort of stuff – and that's a good reason to slow down.

- Secondly, while these visions do hang together with an overall picture of what God's going to do, there are different aspects of God's promise to them – and I think it's worth pausing to spend sufficient time on several of those different aspects.

### **Vision #1**

So let's look at the first vision. Zechariah 1:8

*During the night I had a vision – and there before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown and white horses.*

*I asked, "What are these, my lord?"*

*The angel who was talking with me answered, "I will show you what they are."*

*Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained, "They are the ones the Lord has sent to go throughout the earth."*

*And they reported to the angel of the Lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees, "We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace."*

Now, if you're like me, you probably think Zechariah

hasn't given us enough details. For example, there's one rider on a red horse and other horses behind him.

- Are there riders on the other horses as well?
- Is there just one red, brown and white horse behind him – or could there be more than one of each?

I'd like a few more details.

And then also, I think Zechariah hasn't asked enough questions. I'd have liked him to ask more. For example, is there any significance in the different colours of the horses? People have argued back and forth about that one for ages. It'd have been so much simpler if Zechariah had asked so the angel could have told us.

Now, this points to one of the difficulties we have with apocalyptic literature. We want to focus on the minute details. We want to dot all the i's and cross all the t's in each of the visions. But that's not how apocalyptic works. It's much more interested in the big canvas, rather than the individual brush strokes. In what the angel tells Zechariah, we're told the important stuff. We're told what we need to understand this vision.

These riders have been sent by God throughout the earth. Their purpose is to check things out and report back to God. They didn't have television and radio in those days. They couldn't just flick a switch and push a button and find out what was going on in their world. When kings wanted to find out what was going on in their kingdoms – so that they could rule them more effectively – they had to send messengers out on horses. They'd check things out and report back to the king.

That's what God's doing here. He's sent His angelic mes-

sengers to check out what's happening in His kingdom. Now, of course, God didn't need to do that. He's omniscient. He knows everything. He knows what's going on everywhere in His universe. Yet, in terms of the vision, that's what's happening. God's King. God checks His kingdom. Nothing happens without His knowledge.

The report they bring back is that everything's at rest and in peace. Sounds like a good report, doesn't it? But it's not. Look at verse 12:

*Then the angel of the Lord said, "Lord Almighty, how long will You withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which You have been angry with these seventy years?" So the Lord spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me.*

Turn back a couple of pages to Haggai 2:6. Verse 1 of this chapter dates this word as being just before Zechariah gets his first message from God.

*This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come ..."*

There's an expectation there won't be rest and peace. For God's people, the current situation isn't what they want. The current situation is them under the rule of a foreign power. Until fairly recently, that foreign power had been Babylon. They were exiles in a foreign land. Now they'd returned to Jerusalem – but they were still under a foreign power. They were subjects of the Persian Empire. They expected God to do something about that. They wanted the Persians dealt with. They wanted this shaking of the nations. They wanted their own kingdom established. They wanted the throne of David restored. They didn't

want rest in the north. They wanted God to act.

God says He will. Verse 14:

*Then the angel who was speaking to me said, "Proclaim this word: This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, but I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they added to the calamity."*

*Therefore, this is what the Lord says: "I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there My house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem," declares the Lord Almighty.*

*Proclaim further: 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 exile was a huge event in Israel's history. Before the exile, a significant number of Israelites believed the exile would never happen. They had a special agreement with God. They lived in Jerusalem. They had God's temple. God would never abandon this special place He'd chosen. God sent them prophets to tell them their thinking was wrong. They'd deeply offended God with their wickedness. They'd dishonoured Him before the nations. They deserved God's disciplinary judgment. They'd go into exile – not because God was too weak or He was caught napping or He'd been tricked by some other nation – but because God sent them into exile.

But through those prophets, God also promised them exile wasn't the last word. He'd bring them back. They'd have a glorious future. He'd deal with their enemies. He'd deal with their hard, stony hearts. Now they were

back – but the reality didn't look like the promises.

- Jerusalem was a disaster area.
- They weren't doing much more than just existing.
- Their enemies still ruled.

And so they wondered about God's promises. Why didn't their present experience match their expectations?

God's words of comfort address this. The promises still stand. The time had not yet come – but it will.

- God will return to Jerusalem.
- God's house would be rebuilt.
- God's people would be prosperous.
- God will deal with the enemies.

The people are looking at the rubble. God says: It's OK. I'm going to do something about that. I still rule.

## Vision #2

Verse 18 begins the second vision.

*Then I looked up – and there before me were four horns! I asked the angel who was speaking to me, "What are these?"*

*He answered me, "These are the horns that scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem."*

*Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. I asked, "What are these coming to do?"*

*He answered, "These are the horns that scattered Judah so that no one could raise his head, but the craftsmen have come to terrify them and throw down these horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people."*

*Horn* is a fairly common symbol for strength or might or power. In apocalyptic literature, it's often used to refer to the strength of a nation – and the aggressiveness of a

nation. Zechariah's told these four horns represent those who've scattered God's people.

- We could perhaps identify them with four particular nations – like Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome (except I've just rattled off five).
- Or it could be that four's the symbol for the totality of those who oppose God's people – like we speak of the four winds or the four points of the compass to refer to the totality of all directions.

The vision doesn't stop with the horns. It moves to four craftsmen – and that's a bit of a surprise. We don't normally think of tradesmen in military terms. They're not powerful warriors – they're cabinet makers and carpenters and the like. They're not the sort of people we think of as appropriate to deal with aggressive militant nations. So what's going on here? How do these guys terrorise the mighty nations of the world? Can you imagine sending someone like Jeff to overthrow the United States? Could he even overthrow Botswana? Will they be terrified because he approaches with a power drill in his hands?

There are two main ideas as to how this works out.

- Some see it in terms of successive kingdoms. One kingdom becomes powerful and establishes its world-wide rule and scatters the people of God. But then God raises a craftsman to dismantle that kingdom. But, having done that, that craftsman then becomes the next horn. And then that happens again. And it keeps happening until you get to the craftsman who establishes God's kingdom. That's the sort of thing spoken about in Daniel 7 – and it may be Zechariah has something similar in mind (although I don't think so).

- Some see it in terms of craftsmen coming to rebuild Jerusalem – and especially to rebuild the temple. It's back to the promise in vision #1. The way God overthrows the nations is to build His kingdom. It's as if God's people are on one end of a see-saw and the enemy nations on the other end. If the nations are up, then Jerusalem is down. If Jerusalem's up, then the nations are down. Advancing Jerusalem spells the downfall of the nations.

Again, some of the details are a bit obscure – but the overall point's quite clear. God will act for His people – and He will act through apparent weakness. On the world scale, building the temple may look very insignificant. How could that overthrow the might of a pagan empire? They should not underestimate the significance of what God's called them to do. They may think more important or more urgent matters should occupy their efforts – but nothing has higher priority than God's kingdom. And it often progresses through seeming weakness.

### Vision #3

Further, Jerusalem will be rebuilt. That's picked up in the third vision, which begins in chapter 2.

*Then I looked up – and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand! I asked, "Where are you going?"*

*He answered me, "To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is."*

*Then the angel who was speaking to me left, and another angel came to meet him and said to him: "Run, tell that young man, 'Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it. And I Myself will be a wall of fire*

*around it,' declares the Lord, 'and I will be its glory within'."*

This guy looks like a surveyor. He's getting ready to rebuild Jerusalem. That makes sense after vision #1. What's the first thing you do? Put up the walls. Walls help protect what's inside. They add to the security of the city. Walls slow down any enemy who wants to destroy the rest of the building work. And so this guy measures the length and breadth of Jerusalem. He wants to know what's involved in putting up the walls.

But then he's told to stop. This new Jerusalem won't need any walls. Two reasons are given.

- This new Jerusalem's going to be too big to put walls around. There'll be so many people in the place that it'd simply spread out and overflow any walls that you'd erect.
- And secondly, God will protect this new Jerusalem. He'll be like a wall of fire around the city. Enemies simply won't be able to get to them. God'll guarantee their security. They won't need to worry about enemies throwing spears at them. They won't need to worry about locking their doors.

And so, Israel's given an instruction. Verse 6:

*"Come! Come! Flee from the land of the north," declares the Lord, "for I have scattered you to the four winds of heaven," declares the Lord.*

*"Come, O Zion! Escape, you who live in the Daughter of Babylon!" For his is what the Lord Almighty says: "After he has honoured me and has sent me against the nations that have plundered you – for whoever touches you touches the apple of His eye – I will surely*

*raise my hand against them so that their slaves will plunder them. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me."*

Who are these words addressed to? Remember, Zechariah himself has already left Babylon – the land of the north – and returned to Jerusalem. The people he talks to have already done that as well. What's more, Babylon herself was already defeated. She hadn't been destroyed the way she'd destroyed Jerusalem – but it's the Persians who are now in control, not the Babylonians. So what's this appeal about?

Two possibilities. First, not all the exiles returned to Jerusalem. Some did – but some remained in Babylon and all the other places God scattered them. This vision says: God's re-establishing Jerusalem and judging Israel's enemies. When that happens, where's the best place to be: in Jerusalem or in the lands of God's enemies? Not much point living in the lands that'll be judged. Not much future there. The future's in Jerusalem. So make sure you get to Jerusalem as soon as you can.

The second possibility goes a bit further – and would apply also to those who'd already returned to Jerusalem. In the Bible, Babylon's a place – but it's also more than a place. It represents the anti-God lifestyle. It's the place of rebellion against God. It's the place of arrogance – where self-made people determine their own materialistic and glorious future without reference to God. It's the place of smugness and complacency and feeling secure without God. And so, this appeal is not simply to leave the place; it's also to leave all that Babylon stands for – the anti-God, self-centred way of living that thinks I can

make it on my own and completely ignore God and face no consequences. It's an appeal to repent and return to the Lord. There's no future in the Babylonian lifestyle. That's the lifestyle God judges.

The other side of the coin is taken up in verse 10:

*"Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the Lord. "Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become My people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. The Lord will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because He has roused Himself from His holy dwelling."*

### **The Fulfilment**

So, they're the promises. They're great promises. They speak of a glorious future for God's people. What was the reality? What happened after Zechariah's time?

The temple was rebuilt. It was finished in 516BC. But it wasn't a very glorious building. It was just a pale shadow of Solomon's temple. And Jerusalem was rebuilt – but it had a wall around it. The wall was finished round 445BC. They didn't seem to work to a pressing deadline. And still Israel lived under foreign rule. The Persians were eventually beaten – but their place was taken by the Greeks. And the Greeks were eventually beaten – but their place was taken by the Romans. Their enemies still ruled over them. And the nations didn't flock to Jerusalem. There were some who became proselytes to the Jewish religion – but it didn't seem to live up to the expectations of the promises. So what happened? Did

## God's word fail?

It's all a bit confusing until we open the pages of the New Testament and find that God fulfils His promises in a radical way. John 1:14

*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Jesus said (Jn.2:19-21):

*"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ... But the temple He had spoken of was His body.*

Jesus is the true temple of God. He's not just some building that represents symbolically God's presence with His people on earth – as great as that was for the people of Israel – He's God Himself dwelling among us. He's the real presence of God in a person walking the streets of Palestine. In Jesus, the glory of God returns to Jerusalem.

In Jesus, God defeats the enemies of His people – not the political and military enemies, but the enemies that hold them in true bondage. Paul writes (Col.2:14-15):

*He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

For us, Jesus beats sin and slavery to sin and judgment on sin and death because of sin. Instead of facing the bleak future of God's judgment on our rebellion, we face the glorious future of life forever in the perfection of God's good and pure kingdom.

And, in Jesus, the nations come to Jerusalem – not to the physical city just west of the Dead Sea, but the heavenly Jerusalem where Jesus rules at God's right hand. Paul, writing to those who weren't born as Jews – to those who come from the nations – says (Eph.2:13):

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.*

We weren't members of God's covenant people – we were God's enemies – but God's done something amazing for us. Instead of treating us as enemies, He makes us His friends. He brings us into His people. He adopts us as His children. He enrolls us in the true Jerusalem.

How should we respond to a passage like this? We must flee Babylon. We must flee the enemies of God. We must flee self-satisfied complacency. God has two ways to deal with His enemies – and only two ways.

- One is to make them His friends – that they may join those wanting to live as God's people; that they pour into Jerusalem through Jesus.
- The other is judgment. Those who refuse to flee Babylon will be judged with her.

They are the only options. So, if you know you're still in Babylon – if you still live as God's enemy – can I plead with you to get out.

The other response is in verse 13: be amazed at the way God's fulfilled His promises in Jesus. Be amazed at what God's done for you through Jesus' death in your place. Don't be agitated that God's war goes on so long. The victory's won – these are only the mopping up operations. Don't give up. Keep pressing on. This is the important stuff – learning God's word, growing in godliness, finding

enemies who'll change sides. It may look trivial. It may look like nothing much is happening. But this is what God's doing in our world.