

God's Plans for Evil **Zechariah 5:1-6:15**

As we look around the world today, it's not all that hard to spot a bit of wrongdoing here or there. The news we read and watch brims over with examples.

- People committing murders.
- People committing rapes.
- Arsonists lighting bushfires.
- Politicians lying.
- Businessmen embezzling funds.

The list goes on and on and on.

And when you look on a worldwide scale, the picture can seem overwhelming.

- Nation fighting against nation.
- Tribes attempting genocide.
- Refugees starving to death.
- Multinationals raping the environment.
- Attacks of terrorists.

What's the future for planet earth? What's the future for humanity? Do we have a future?

But we don't even have to look "out there" to see the wrongdoing. We can simply look inside. Sure, we can do a pretty good job on the outside – we can control ourselves so that we look nice and can function in civilised society and seem to be relatively good. But inside we know better. We've got all this pride and envy and greed and lust and hate and bitterness and malice and impurity and anger and idolatry bumping around. We hide it under fancy clothes and a smiling face – but we can't get rid of it. What's our future?

In 520^{BC}, God's people lived in a world something like ours. The nations of that world didn't have the weapons of mass destruction available to countries today – but they did the best with what they had.

- They wiped out other nations for the purpose of greedily getting more land for themselves.
- They sold whole populations into slavery because it was a profitable business transaction.
- Refugees were treated cruelly.

And their inner battle with pride and greed and hate was just the same as ours. They too weren't capable of purging their own lives of these ungodly attitudes.

Into such a world, God sent the prophet Zechariah eight visions. We've looked at the first five over the last two weeks. They spoke of God's plans for the future.

- Those plans included having a secure place for His people – though Jerusalem would be a city without walls, it would remain secure because God Himself would protect her inhabitants. God would rebuild the temple in the midst of the city.
- Those plans included providing godly leadership. The high priest Joshua had his filthy clothes removed and replaced with clean ones. The governor Zerubbabel was empowered by God's Spirit to complete the task given him.

These next visions refer to what God will do about evil.

The Flying Scroll

The sixth vision starts at 5:1

I looked again – and there before me was a flying scroll!

He asked me, "What do you see?"

I answered, "I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and

fifteen feet wide,"

And he said to me, "This is the curse that is going out over the whole land; for according to what it says on one side, every thief will be banished, and according to what it says on the other, everyone who swears falsely will be banished. The Lord Almighty declares, 'I will send it out, and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by My name. It will remain in his house and destroy it, both its timbers and its stones'."

It's an unusual vision. When's the last time you saw a scroll flying? It's not the sort of thing scrolls do. Maybe a strong wind might pick up a scroll and carry it along, but that's not the image in this vision. And it's an unusual scroll – it's huge. It's the size of a billboard. Can you imagine having a scroll in the synagogue that's 5 metres wide? It'd be a bit hard to read.

This scroll's covered with a curse on both sides. It's God's curse sent out over the land. It's a curse showing God's intention to eradicate evil from the community.

- It's big – so it's confronting. It's not the sort of thing you can easily miss.
- It's flying – so it's swift and movable. It can deal with evil wherever it appears. Like an eagle swooping down out of the sky on its prey, so this scroll can reach those caught up in wickedness.
- It's written – so it's uncompromising. The nature of evil doesn't change. The nature of God's curse on evil doesn't change.

God's justice will seek out and hunt down evil-doers and deal with them. Such people have no place in God's community.

Two particular types of evil are mentioned:

- the thief; and
- the one who swears falsely.

Why these two? Why not murderers? Why not idolaters? It could be these were particular problems in the community of returned exiles. Maybe life was so tough that outbreaks of theft resulted as people struggled to put enough food on their tables. Maybe those caught in such activities strongly swore their innocence in courts – thus both committing perjury and taking God's name in vain. That's possible.

However, I think it's more likely these are just representative acts of evil. It's not that God's particularly down on thieves this month, but adulterers can have a free run. God's attitude to evil is constant – no matter who does it, no matter what the evil. I suspect these two particular sins stand for all sin. Some point out that:

- the sin of thieving comes from the second half of the ten commandments – the commandments to do with loving your neighbour as yourself; and
- the sin of swearing falsely comes from the first half of the ten commandments – the one about taking God's name in vain – the commandments having to do with loving God with all your heart, mind and strength.

That may well be the case – although I'm not sure how many recognised that division before Jesus pointed it out. Still, I think the scroll encompasses all evil.

The point of the vision is that God will eradicate evil from the land. It's all well and good they'll have the temple rebuilt and the city up and running again – but, if

they haven't dealt with the root cause of the exile, what's the long-term benefit? Before the exile, they fell into the error of superstitious thinking. They thought Jerusalem wouldn't fall because God's temple was there. It didn't matter that they'd ignored God. It didn't matter they were wicked through and through. They thought themselves safe because they lived next-door to God's special building. They were wrong. God destroyed the temple and sent them into exile.

It was important they not fall into the same error now they'd returned. Yes, it was great that the city would be rebuilt. It was great the temple would again become a focal point. Nothing wrong with that. But they weren't the most important things. More important still was that the problem of evil be dealt with. For as long as they continued to do wrong, who was to say they wouldn't have to go into exile again. Here God promises to remove from the community those who persist in evil. They are not to be complacent about wickedness.

The Flying Basket

The seventh vision also deals with the subject of evil and its removal. 5:5

Then the angel who was speaking to me came forward and said to me, "Look up and see what this is that is appearing."

I asked, "What is it?"

He replied, "It is a measuring basket." And he added, "This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land."

Then the cover of lead was raised, and there in the basket sat a woman! He said, "This is wickedness," and he pushed her back into the basket and pushed the

lead cover down over its mouth.

Then I looked up – and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth.

"Where are they taking the basket?" I asked the angel who was speaking to me.

He replied, "To the country of Babylonia to build a house for it. When it is ready, the basket will be set there in its place."

This measuring basket holds an ephah – you can see that in the NIV footnote. Scholars aren't sure exactly how big an ephah is – and the measure may have varied at different times of Israel's history – but they're quite confident it's not big enough to fit a woman. So the picture here is of this woman crammed into the basket.

The woman represents wickedness. It's all crammed into this basket and pushed down and contained. The lid's opened and the woman tries to escape – but she's pushed back down by the angel. God's in control of this operation. Wickedness won't be allowed to escape. Then the basket's taken off to Shinar – to Babylonia – and housed there or put on a pedestal there.

Shinar has echoes of the Tower of Babel back in Genesis 11. There the people of the earth gathered together. In their wickedness and arrogance they sought to build a tower to connect them to the heavens. God judged them by confusing their languages and thus spread them over the whole earth. It becomes a symbol of the kingdom of man – of the human race organised in defiance of God. Now wickedness is being taken to that place – away from

God's kingdom to the place where it belongs.

Again, God promises to do something about the problem of sin and evil.

- It'll be bundled up and removed from His people.
- It'll be taken off to a distant land – a place that's far removed from where His people live.
- There, it'll be given its own confined place – where those who persist in it worship it as their god.

It's like getting rid of nuclear waste. It's all carefully sealed up in protective containers. Then it's taken to a place far away. No one wants it in their backyard. No one wants this toxic substance close by in case it somehow breaks free of the protection put around it.

Why do we have two visions dealing with evil? It's an important subject. Indeed, in one sense, it's the main subject of the whole Bible. Ever since evil's introduced into creation back in Genesis 3, the Bible's story's all about the steps God takes to get rid of this toxic substance. This is humanity's number one problem. Any other problem's insignificant when compared with this one. It's that important.

These visions remind us that having God in your midst has implications for how you live.

- God removes from His community those who persist in evil. They have no place in God's kingdom.
- You can't serve the true God and the gods of this world. Those gods belong in Babylon – and Babylon will be judged as the next vision shows. As Jesus says: You can't serve God and money.

The Flying Chariots

The final vision starts at 6:1

I looked up again – and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains – mountains of bronze! The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled – all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, "What are these, my lord?"

The angel answered me, "These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world. The one with the black horses is going toward the north country, the one with the white horses toward the west, and the one with the dappled horses toward the south."

When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, "Go throughout the earth!" So they went throughout the earth.

Then he called to me, "Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north."

Back in the first vision, Zechariah met four patrols that had just returned from checking out events on earth. Here, he meets four patrols about to go out – but these patrols look much more impressive.

- They're connected to chariots.
- They come from between bronze mountains.

People argue about the significance of the mountains.

- Some note the definite article is used – it's "the" two mountains and they identify them with Mount Zion and the Mount of Olives (neither of which were particularly impressive mountains).

- Some pick up on the word "bronze" and connect it with the two bronze pillars of Solomon's temple.
- Some think of mountains representing the dwelling places of the gods.

In the long run, they all make basically the same point. These chariots issue from God's dwelling place – whether that be Jerusalem or the heavenly temple. This is God's action. They go out with God's authority.

And it's chariots that go out to do His bidding. These were the most advanced war machines of that day – like sending out the SAS. They're thundering out to deal with the issues God wants dealt with. They're the crack troops. They're well equipped for the task. And they're keen to go on their mission. They're straining at the bit. They want to go out and conquer evil and vanquish God's enemies. Those enemies should be trembling in their boots. And, while they go throughout the whole earth, it's what happens in the north that's drawn to our attention.

Back in the first vision, when the patrols report back, all's at rest. That's a bad thing. It means the enemies of God's people still rule. It means the earth's still at rest in its wickedness and rebellion against God. The angel asked how long it'd be before God acted and brought true peace to Jerusalem. Now, in this vision, we're told God's Spirit has rest in the land of the north – not that the nations have rest, but God's Spirit.

- It means God's enemies have been dealt with. Those opposing God's rule are defeated. They're crushed and won't be a problem anymore.
- It means that evil's been dealt with. While Babylon's pretty well due east of Jerusalem, she's still considered the land of the north – because that's the

direction from which she attacked Israel. She came sweeping down from the north. And that's where the basket of evil's been taken. God's Spirit now has rest in the north – and so evil must have been dealt with to God's satisfaction.

The Glorious Future

We're given here in these three visions a picture of the end. It's like the final chapters of Revelation. We read that passage from Revelation 19 earlier – of how all those opposing God are crushed. They come to fight God. They gather their armies to oppose Him. But they've got no chance. How can mere humans pit themselves against their Creator – no matter how many of them there may be? All God's enemies are defeated and thrown into the lake of fire.

Then we're given a vision of the new order.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

When God finished creating, He rested on the seventh day. Once again, God's Spirit is at rest – because evil's been dealt with and eliminated. What'll it be like for us?

What'll it be like to live in a world where there's no more war or poverty or murder or theft or rape or terrorism? What'll it be like to have a mind that's not plagued with pride or greed or envy or lust or anger or bitterness? My mind struggles to imagine fully how that'll be. I'm just so used to living with evil – the evil around me and the evil within me. It's hard to imagine perfect goodness – to imagine life without all that evil I'm used to. I can begin to get there – and that's a great vision – but the reality will be greater than what I can currently grasp.

The Crowned Priest

So, how will it all happen? Come back to Zechariah 6:9

The word of the Lord came to me: "Take silver and gold from the exiles Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah, who have arrived from Babylon. Go the same day to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah. Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. Tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.' The crown will be given to Heldai, Tobijah, Jedaiah and Hen son of Zephaniah as a memorial in the temple of the Lord. Those who are far away will come and help to build the temple of the Lord, and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. This will happen if you diligently obey the Lord your God.

There are a few unusual things happening here.

- First, we have a crown for a high priest. Priests wear turbans (as we saw last week), not crowns. Kings wear crowns. But this guy Joshua's not a king.
- Secondly, this guy's called *the Branch*. The Branch was mentioned back in chapter 3 – He's God's Servant who'll remove sin in a single day. He wasn't Joshua. He was distinguished from Joshua. So do we have one Branch or two – or maybe a whole tree?
- Thirdly, here we're told Joshua will build the temple. Back in chapter 4, it was Zerubbabel who'd build the temple. Zerubbabel's temple isn't the final one.
- Fourthly, Joshua gets crowned – but it doesn't look like he's crowned for very long. The crown's taken away and kept as a memorial in the temple.

It's making the same point we saw last week. The Jews expected a kingly Messiah. They had God's promise to David – his descendants would sit on his throne forever. So, they expected a Messiah to come from the line of David. They expected this Messiah to sit on the throne in Jerusalem and rule from there. But last week, we saw there were two anointed ones – both Zerubbabel and Joshua. And together they pointed forward to Jesus.

- He's our great high priest who's offered the perfect sacrifice for us that cleanses us from sin once for all and allows us free access into God's presence.
- He's the Davidic King who's raised from the dead and now rules over God's kingdom and brings His people within that glorious rule.

The high priest is crowned King and sits on His throne in glorious majesty.

We've become used to this – because we've seen the ending to the movie. We've read the New Testament. We've read the book of Hebrews. We know Jesus is our great High Priest in the order of Melchizedek. But this was new for the people in Zechariah's time. Indeed, the expectations around in Jesus' times suggests they didn't really pick up on this passage in Zechariah.

But this is how God removes sin. This is how God deals with evil.

- Jesus takes God's curse on Himself. He became a curse for us. In this way we've been freed from God's curse on our evil. We can now receive God's blessing instead of God's curse.
- Jesus removes evil from God's kingdom. We're born again into God's family. We're changed from rebels into children. Jesus gives us His Spirit to live within us to enable us to resist evil and do good. In this, we're not perfect yet – but we have God's promise that we will be. When we enter the fullness of His kingdom, we'll have hearts that desire God's will perfectly.

Conclusion

Now, if this is where history's headed – if God's moving things towards the eradication of evil and His own rest – what implications does that have for us? It's fairly clear, isn't it?

If God's on a search and destroy mission in relation to evil – if His flying scroll is penetrating into all parts of the earth – it seems fairly pointless to pursue an evil life-style. There's not much future in that. It will be found. It

will be cursed. So the call's to give that up. Jesus bore the curse for you so you don't have to bear it yourself. Trust in Jesus so you can receive God's great blessings – the blessings of life forever with Him in the perfection of His kingdom. Why hesitate to give up something that'll be destroyed anyway? Why hesitate to grasp hold of something that's simply the best.

For those of us who've already settled that fundamental issue – who've set aside our rebellion against God and joined His side – the implications are much the same, aren't they? After all, these visions are directed to God's people. This is the future – life under the rule of King Jesus without a shadow of evil. Shouldn't that future be reflected in our present?

- Shouldn't we now submit to our King. He's the One enthroned. He's the One clothed in majesty. He's the One who's magnificently glorious. He's the One at the centre of God's plans. Should not our lives revolve around Him? Do we still have that focus? Or have we been sidetracked? Are we treating something – or someone (such as ourselves) – as being more glorious than Jesus?
- And shouldn't we be seeking to eliminate evil from our lives? We're not perfect yet – and the Bible indicates we won't be this side of Jesus' return – but that's the future we long for. And so, shouldn't we long to get rid of all evil from our lives now? Shouldn't we hunger and thirst after righteousness now? Not simply paying it lip-service, but really digging into our lives and getting rid of that which displeases Jesus.