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1

THE INTRODUCTORY CALL TO REPENTANCE

(ZECHARIAH 1:1-6)

The return to their Judean homeland in 537 B.C. constituted a new beginning for the Jewish exiles. As the Exodus from Egypt had resulted in the establishment of the Israelite nation, so this “second exodus” (cf. Isa. 11:16; 51:9-11) resulted in the refounding of Judah. But the returned exiles faltered as they made this fresh start. Although the foundation of the Temple had been laid, a neglect of spiritual priorities prevented its completion (Hag. 1:4). The lax spiritual condition of the Judeans could never be blessed by the Lord. Zechariah knew that genuine repentance was the prerequisite for spiritual blessing.

Zechariah’s words were hard but necessary ones for a people who had failed to take God seriously. Verse 3 is the key to this section. God promised a change in His manner of dealing with His people if they would but change their ways.

THE SUPERScription (1:1)

Zechariah began his prophetic ministry in 520 B.C., or in the eighth month of the second year of Darius (522-486 B.C.). The eighth month, known on ancient Jewish calendars as Marchesvan, coincides with October-November on our Julian calendar. The eighth month began on October 27, 520 B.C. Unlike the other dates given in Haggai and Zechariah, the day of the month is not given here. The absence of a date has led some to suggest that it was the new moon—the first day of the

month. Although this view has the support of the Syriac version, it is better to set a pattern early in this study of avoiding speculation in commenting on Zechariah.

Zechariah identifies himself as a prophet who brings the authoritative "word of the LORD" to the people. Although the derivation of the Hebrew word for prophet (*nabi*) is debated, the meaning is quite clear from Scripture. A prophet is one who speaks forth the message that God has revealed to him (cf. Ex. 7:1-2).¹ As a spokesman for God, Zechariah's primary duty was to faithfully declare God's message to God's people.

Zechariah the prophet appears to have a significant spiritual heritage. As the grandson of Iddo, one of the heads of the priestly families that returned from Babylon to Judea (Neh. 12:4, 16), Zechariah was a member of the tribe of Levi and probably served both as a priest and a prophet. His priestly lineage may have given him a special burden for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the full restoration of worship.

THE PROPHET'S CALL (1:2-3)

In dealing with His sinful people, God does not mince words or sidestep issues. The first prophetic utterance is a strong affirmation of Yahweh's anger against the "fathers." In this context, the "fathers" refers not to the patriarchs, but to the forefathers of the generation to whom Zechariah ministered (cf. 7:9-12; 8:14). This was the generation that heard but did not heed the rebukes of the prophets and fell under judgment (cf. 2 Chron. 36:15-16). Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Judeans were taken into exile.

The verb "was angry" is supplemented in the Hebrew text by a noun made up of the same three letters, which strengthens the verb's force. The phrase could be translated, "Yahweh was extremely angry with your fathers."

1. J. Carl Laney, "The Role of the Prophets in God's Case Against Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (October-December 1981): 314.

The anger of God is a subject that is frequently overlooked and neglected by Christians today. God's attribute of love is often pitted against this attribute, thus diminishing its importance. How can a loving God execute wrathful judgment? The key is to recognize that God's wrath against sin is in keeping with His infinitely holy character. He cannot look on sin with indifference. That which falls short of the standard of God's own character must be judged. Yet Scripture reveals that God does not judge hastily. He is "slow to anger" (Nah. 1:3). The fact that this earth continues to exist in spite of man's sin and rebellion is a testimony to God's infinite grace. As the apostle Peter declares, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). God's wrath and God's love are affirmed in both testaments (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 7:7-11; John 3:16, 36). Neither of those attributes can be denied without diminishing the true character of God.

The theme of Zechariah's first prophetic message reflects the central thrust of his ministry. It is found in verse 3 where Yahweh issues a call to repentance. The imperative "return" implies a change of mind that issues in a change of conduct. Such repentance is illustrated by the Thessalonians who "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). The words "to Me" personalize the call to repentance. God desires a personal relationship with His people. But repentance from sin is the prerequisite for such fellowship. A sincere return to the Lord will result in a relationship in which the repentant sinner can experience God's blessing (cf. Hag. 2:17-19). The theme in verse 3 must have had a significant impact on the people for it appeared years later in the preaching of Malachi (Mal. 3:7).

God is designated "LORD [Yahweh] of hosts" three times in verse 3. This is a military designation of referring to God as the One who commands the angelic armies of heaven (1 Kings 22:19; Luke 2:13; Rev. 19:14) and the armies of Israel (Judg. 5:14; 1 Sam. 17:45). Whereas the "LORD of hosts" designa-

tion appears 261 times in the Old Testament, the greatest concentration of occurrences is in the postexilic prophets: Haggai (14), Zechariah (53), and Malachi (24). The expression emphasizes the sovereignty and omnipotence of God as the supreme commander of every earthly, heavenly, or cosmic force. J. E. Hartley observes, "Although the title has military overtones, it points directly to Yahweh's rulership over the entire universe."² It is a most exalted title. Zechariah seems to be saying to the people, "Return to the God from whom you have departed. The King of the Universe desires fellowship with *you!*"

THE PROPHET'S WARNING (1:4-6)

In verses 4-6 Zechariah warns the postexilic community against following the example of their forefathers who refused to repent and were taken into exile. "Do not be like your fathers," exhorts Zechariah. The "former prophets" would be those spokesmen of God who ministered during the closing years of the Judean monarchy, such as Habakkuk and Jeremiah. The message of Jeremiah appears to be capsulated in verse 4, "Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds" (cf. Jer. 18:11; 25:5; 35:15). The words "evil ways" and "evil deeds" reflect the awful depravity of the Judeans in Jeremiah's day (cf. Jer. 2:13; 3:1-2; 5:7-9, 19). But the people neither heard nor did they heed God's Word through the prophets.

In verses 5-6a Zechariah asks three rhetorical questions designed to encourage his listeners to respond to his message. The first question, "Your fathers, where are they?" served to remind the returned exiles that the judgments announced by the former prophets were literally fulfilled. Their forefathers, having been killed or exiled by the Babylonians, were no more. The second question, "And the prophets, do they live forever?" served to remind the listeners that there was a

2. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, B. K. Waltke, s.v. *seba'ot*, by J. E. Hartley, 2: 750-51.

limited opportunity during which to respond to the prophet's message. Judgment is certain, and life is short. Don't pass up the opportunity to repent today!

The third question (v. 6*a*) asked by Zechariah served to remind the returned exiles that their forefathers were judged in accordance with the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant. The "words and statutes" must refer specifically to the cursings of the covenant found in Deuteronomy 28:15-68. The same Hebrew word "overtake" occurs in Deuteronomy 28:15, 45 with reference to the curses that would overtake the disobedient Israelites as a savage beast overtakes its prey.

There is some debate as to whether the repentance referred to in verse 6*b* refers to the response of the former generation of Jews who had been taken into exile or to the later generation to whom Zechariah addressed his prophecies. The second view would be supported by the fact that the verb "repeated" in verse 6*b* is the same Hebrew word used in verse 3. Zechariah called the people to repentance (v. 3), and their response to his exhortation was immediate and positive. The antecedent of the "they repented" is found in verse 3, "therefore say to *them*." Those who heard Zechariah returned to the Lord, "repented" as they had been exhorted in verse 3. In turning back to the Lord they acknowledged that the Lord's purpose had been accomplished in His dealings with their forefathers. The discipline of exile was in accordance with their evil ways and deeds (cf. 1:4). What had taken place in 586 B.C. was no mere chance happening. The destruction of Jerusalem was a manifestation of God's sovereign dealings with His disobedient people.