

Chapter Twenty-Five God Encourages: Zechariah, Malachi

The prophet Zechariah was a young contemporary of Haggai. Both ministered to the remnant of the people who had returned from captivity in Babylon. It was a discouraging and depressing time for, although they were back in Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple had begun, they were still vassals of Babylon, subject to the Gentile powers around them, without much hope for the future.

The dating of God's first message to Zechariah indicates that it fell between two of the messages which Haggai had addressed to the people. Thus both of these prophets were attempting to awaken the people to new hope and new activity.

Zechariah introduces himself as the son of Berechiah, who was in turn the son of Iddo, the prophet. These names are significant, for *Zechariah* means "God remembers," *Berechiah* means "God blesses" and Iddo means "at the appointed time." Thus even in the prophets' names God has hidden the theme of the book of Zechariah, for His message was a reminder that God remembered His people and would bless them at the appointed time.

The prophecy of Zechariah has been called "The Apocalypse of the Old Testament," for like the book of Revelation, it is an unveiling of the unseen things. That is what *apocalypse* means, a revelation, an unveiling. However, in Zechariah Israel is in the foreground and the Gentile nations in the background, while in the book of Revelation the reverse is true.

Zechariah 1:2,3 gives a brief summary of the book in outline form. It reads:

"The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them Thus says the Lord of hosts: Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts."

Three divisions of Zechariah's prophecy are indicated by the repetition of the dramatic name "the Lord of hosts." This is one of the unusual names of God in the Scriptures, and means "God of the masses," the Lord of *all* hosts--whether angel, human, demonic, whatever. Even the stars are referred to in Scripture as the hosts, and whatever hosts or masses may be in view. Jehovah is the God who is sovereign over them all.

The statement that indicates the first division is: "The Lord was very angry with your fathers." This is then enlarged upon in verses 4-6, describing God's displeasure with His people.

The theme of the second division is described by the words, "Return to me," and from 1:7 to 6:15 Zechariah tells of God's program to deliver His people and bring them back to Himself.

The third division, chapters 7-14, is an exposition of the words in verse 3 of chapter I, "And I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts." This is always the program of God. If anyone finds himself straying away from the Divine Presence so that life grows cold and faith grows dim, exposing him to great temptations and pressures toward evil, the only recourse is to turn to the Lord. If you want God back in your life with all the glory His presence entails, then come back to Him. That is the formula for recovery.

The first division is a brief reminder by the prophet that the history of Israel has been one of departing from the words and ways of God. There is no need for the prophet to enlarge on this, for the long years of captivity in Babylon were sufficient confirmation that moral departure brings God's displeasure.

The Second Division

Beginning with 1:7, a most remarkable vision was given to the prophet. It was actually eight visions in one which were all shown to Zechariah on the same night. These eight visions fall into three major divisions which may be likened to three acts in a great drama revealed to the prophet. As we read them we may imagine ourselves as spectators to this drama which God is unfolding to Zechariah. God is the Author; Zechariah is the producer; and we are the audience.

The entire vision covers the time from Zechariah's day through all of subsequent history to the return of the Lord to His people in power and glory. The first act is made up of two visions. The prophet sees a Watcher looking out over the people in a valley. The Watcher is riding upon a horse, and with him are other riders upon horses. The angel of the Lord interprets the vision to the prophet. It means simply that Israel--symbolized here by the lowly myrtle shrub--were the people shadowed in the valley, watched over by a divine Watcher. The returned exiles could clearly see that they were indeed in a shadowed place, but what they could not see was the One who was watching the whole procedure, who had with Him great resources to meet their need in the hour of despair. This was what the vision revealed to them.

The second vision in the first act reveals four smiths or workmen--actually carpenters. The prophet saw four horns and four carpenters, and this too is interpreted to the prophet. Like the riders in the first vision, the four carpenters are divine agents who are sent out to terrify the nations, symbolized by the four horns. The people of Zechariah's day were discouraged by the seeming invincibility of the great powers arrayed against them, but what they did not see was the divine resources. They were unconscious of the divine agents who were there to move on their behalf, and that is what God revealed to them.

Thus the curtain falls at the end of Act one, and in the second chapter it rises on Act two, which is but a single vision. It was the vision of a man with a measuring line in his hand who went out to measure the city of Jerusalem and as he did this the interpreting angel said to the prophet:

"Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of men and cattle in it. For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the Lord and I will be the glory within her" (2:4, 5).

This is followed by a beautiful description of the days of blessing which are to come upon Israel, all to be literally fulfilled as Israel would be brought into the place of blessing in the land. It was God's way of saying to the people, "Come back to me and blessing will flow to you." Blessing can come from no other source. It is only from the resources of God that joy, love and peace can flow. The man with the measuring line was sent to highlight, by contrast, the measureless blessings God was ready to pour out to those who returned to a relationship with Him.

Act three consists of five more visions. Here the way to return to God is acted out in five steps. In the first scene Joshua the high priest is revealed, standing before God. Opposed to him is Satan, the adversary. The people of Zechariah's day knew well that Satan was against them, but what they could not see was the Advocate, the One who stood on their behalf and ministered for them. Then, in this wonderfully moving vision, the prophet saw how Joshua was cleansed. His filthy garments were taken off and he was clad in new, clean garments. The reason for this was given: "I have chosen Jerusalem" (see 3:2). The way this cleansing of God's chosen people would occur is then clearly described: "Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day" (3:8, 9).

This is a marvelous prophecy of the coming of Jehovah's servant, the Branch. He would be areas stone upon which God would make certain engraving (this, perhaps, refers to the marks of crucifixion), and by Him the guilt of the land would be removed in a single day. It is clear in this vision that cleansing is the first step the way back.

Then in Scene two we learn what follows was the cleansing of God. It is a vision of a lampstand and two olive trees. The trees continually dripped oil from their branches into the lampstand, which was burning brightly. Oil is everywhere in Scripture used symbolically of the Holy Spirit, and this is a wonderfully symbolic description of the truth that God will dwell within, supplying inner resource that makes it possible for his own to burn brightly as lights in the midst of a dark generation. Thus the word of the Lord was addressed particularly to Zerubbabel, the governor, saying: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts" (4:6).

Scene three (5:1-4) describes a flying scroll with writing on both sides, containing curses against thieves and those who blaspheme among the people. It was a picture of the law in the midst of corruption. The people could see the corruption in their midst, but they could not see the law, so this is God's encouragement in the hour of darkness, that God's law was still at work, bringing a curse upon lawlessness, bringing it ultimately to an end.

In Scene four (5:5-11), Zechariah saw a woman in an ephah, which was a measure of grain very much like our bushel basket. While the prophet and the interpreting angel watched, wings were given to this basket and it flew away to Babylon. Though the prophet is given no explanation of this, it is possible to interpret it because it contains terms which are used elsewhere in Scripture. Whenever a woman appears as symbolic of evil it is always a reference to something religiously wrong. Here then is the picture of the judgment of false faith, very much as in the book of Revelation, where a woman who is the false church is called "mystery: 'Babylon the great'" (Rev. 17:5). Zechariah sees God's judgment falling upon hypocritical religions. The people could see the hypocrisy of their religious leaders, but they could not see the power of God to identify it as Babylonian in its origin and thus expose it and render it powerless.

In the last scene of Act three, the prophet sees four chariots which were driven out upon the earth (Zech. 6:1-8). It is very much like the vision in the book of Revelation of four horsemen who ride out to bring judgment upon the earth (Rev. 6:1-8). The number four is the symbol of universality, and the four riders are sent out to bring judgment upon the whole world.

Thus the curtain rings down on the great drama of redemption. It is God's symbolic play of how to find the way back to Him--first by cleansing, then the filling of the Holy Spirit, then the putting away of lawlessness and hypocrisy, and finally the judgment of the entire earth.

Chapter 6 of Zechariah closes with a prophetic vision of the crowning of the One whose name is the Branch, and it is said of Him: "He shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne" (6:12, 13).

The true temple, as we have seen, is the church of the living God, and this scene depicts the building of that great dwelling place of God by the Spirit, which Jesus, the great King-Priest, is building to the glory of His Father.

Chapter 7 marks the beginning of the last division of the book. Here God speaks in a different form, for instead of visions He addresses the prophet directly. The theme of the section is found in chapter 8, verse 3: "Thus says the Lord: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain."

The historical setting for this message of hope and promise was an inquiry from the people as to whether they should continue celebrating the fast which had been begun in memory of the burning of Jerusalem in the fifth month of the year. God's answer was to point out that such fasts had been instituted not by divine command but solely on the initiative of the people. They were reminded that what God sought for was justice and mercy rather than the observance of self-appointed ritual. The inference was clear that had they been obedient the occasion for this fast would never have occurred. Despite the shameful record of the people's failure, God promises that when they walk in obedience and return to Him He shall turn the fasts into feasts to such a degree that all the nations around will envy the prosperity of Jerusalem and: "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying 'Let us go with you, for we have heard

that God is with you" (8:23).

In chapters 9-11 the prophet continues his description of the means by which God will return to His people, but this time in prophetic poetry very much in the style of Isaiah or Ezekiel. First he predicts an invasion of Israel during which Damascus, Tyre, and Sidon, and the cities of Philistia would be captured, but Jerusalem would not be attacked. This was historically fulfilled by the coming of Alexander the Great who captured Damascus and, after a siege of seven months, overthrew Tyre. He then marched against Gaza and Philistia, razing the cities to the ground; but though he passed by Jerusalem he did not attack it. Thus Zechariah's prophecy was fulfilled. In 9:9 his prophetic vision predicts the actual appearance of the divine king in Jerusalem: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." Matthew 21 records the fulfillment of this when Jesus sent His disciples to find a colt and an ass and mounted the colt to ride in triumph through the streets of Jerusalem with the people crying, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Luke tells us that as He drew near Jerusalem He wept as He looked out over the impenitent city and said these remarkable words: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes" (Luke 19:42).

The remainder of Zechariah 9 is a prediction of victory for the sons of Judah over the sons of Greece, and many Bible scholars feel it speaks of the Maccabean uprising and victory of the Jews over Antiochus Epiphanes.

In chapter 10 the prophet looks ahead to describe the final victory of the people of God. The promise is specific: "Though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return. I will bring them home from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria; and I will bring them to the land of Gilead and to Lebanon, till there is no room for them" (10:9,10).

But in chapter 11 the prophet returns to a day during which a fire of judgment will devour the people and spoil the glory of the false shepherds. Many take this to be a description of the Roman conquest of Israel and the subjugation of the priesthood under Roman rule. Then the prophet is called upon to act out the role of the Good Shepherd who holds in His hands two staves, named Grace and Union. This true Shepherd then rejects the false shepherds and is in turn rejected by the people. The staff labeled Grace is broken in half and the Shepherd is given His wages, consisting of 30 shekels of silver which are cast into the treasury (in Hebrew it is the word *potter*). This is a remarkable foreview of the betrayal by Judas for 30 shekels of silver, which were ultimately paid to the potter for the field in which the body of Judas was buried.

After this the prophet, still enacting the role of the Good Shepherd, broke the second staff labeled Union and thus symbolized the breakup of the nation and its ultimate dispersion among the nations of the world.

The prophet is then told to play the role of a false shepherd, for Jehovah says: "For lo, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the sound, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs" (11:16). Very likely Jesus had this passage in mind when He said to the blinded Pharisees of His day: "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (John 5:43).

This false shepherd is the one whom the apostle Paul calls the man of sin who shall be received as the Messiah but turns out to be the anti-Messiah, the one we know as the antichrist (see 2 Thess. 2:1-4). It is remarkable that today, when many are falling into the error of anti-Christian cults, they do so because they have first rejected an opportunity to hear the truth. The result is they are allowed to believe a lie, just as Paul warns will be the case in the last days.

Zechariah 12-14 constitute the last vision of the prophet and his final description of how God finds a way to return to His people. It opens with these words: "Lo, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of reeling to all the peoples round about; it will be against Judah also in the siege against Jerusalem. On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will come together against it" (12:2, 3). According to this word the darkest days for Jerusalem lie yet ahead. It shall become a burden to all nations, a grievous stone of stumbling. Against it the peoples of the

nations shall be gathered together, for Zechariah informs us that God will not allow Himself to be ignored, but the ultimate breakthrough will come by the actions of divine grace.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born" (12:10).

After the mourning comes the cleansing of the people and the setting aside of the idols of the land. Then prophecy will be brought to an end, for there shall be no need for further prediction. The time has come when all that the prophets have uttered shall be fulfilled.

In chapter 14 the prophet returns again to the vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, and describes how the nations surround it and the city is taken and plundered, and at that time he declares: "Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward. And the valley of my mountains shall be stopped up, for the valley of the mountains shall touch the side of it; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord your God will come, and all the holy ones with him" (14:3-5).

Geologists have long known that a great earth fault runs through the Mount of Olives. There is certainly coming a day when the mountain shall be split in half and the armies of the nations that assault it shall flee in terror.

The prophetic vision goes on to say: "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea, it shall continue in summer as in winter. And the Lord will become king over all the earth on that day the Lord will be one and his name one" (14:8,9).

This accords with the description of Ezekiel and Joel and depicts the glory of the earth in the days when God shall reign, through His Son, as King over all the earth. The book then closes with these beautiful words: "And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, 'Holy to the Lord.' And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar, and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the flesh of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day" (14:20, 21).

Every commonplace thing is yet to be made holy unto the Lord. Have you realized that that is what God is promising you? Every moment of your life, every commonplace thing, shall be touched with the glory of His presence when He is in the center of your life. Someday it will be visibly true on earth, but it can be spiritually true of those who open their hearts and enthrone the King of Glory as Lord in their lives right now!

MALACHI

This last book of the Old Testament is separated in time from the first book of the New Testament by a period of more than 400 years. After the ministry of Malachi the heavens fell silent, and no prophet came to Israel and no further Scriptures were written. History, of course, was still going on, and remarkable things were taking place in Israel among the Jews. New institutions were being formed that appear in the opening of the New Testament, but none of this is recorded in sacred history.

As we have already seen, the Jews did not return from Babylon in one great happy throng. There was a drawn out, straggling return, consisting of several groups. The first one, led by Zerubbabel, was in 535 B.C. After building their own homes they began to lay the foundations of the Temple, but when this work slowed to a halt it was Haggai's ministry 15 years later that stirred them up to carry on the work.

The Temple was completed during the ministry of Zechariah, and during this time Ezra the priest led another group back from Babylon. Finally the last return was accomplished under Nehemiah, who in 445 B.C. began to lay the walls of the city of Jerusalem.

It was shortly after Nehemiah finished his task that the prophet Malachi appeared on the scene. If the prophecy of Malachi is read in connection with the historical events of Nehemiah, it is clearly evident that they were contemporary.

The name *Malachi* means "my messenger." The prophecy opens with a tender and sensitive word from the Lord to the people: "'I have loved you,' says the Lord" (1:2). This is the underlying theme of Malachi's prophecy, and forms the bright background against which is seen, in stark contrast, the darkened hearts and blinded minds of the people.

Though the Temple was now completed and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, still the people were not enjoying the promised period of blessing and prosperity which Haggai and Zechariah had predicted. As a consequence, their reply to the Lord's vow of love was: "How have you loved us?" The structure of the book of Malachi is here revealed, for again and again God declares His expectation of love from them in return for His love of them, and seven times the people reply, in effect: "How have we fallen short? We do not see any failure on our part." Here is a callous people who have become so indifferent and unresponsive to God that, in perfect sincerity, they can reply, "What do you mean--why do you say such things to us? We do not see any evidence of love on your part."

God's answer to their question, How have you loved us? is to remind them that His love dated from the very beginning of the race, as evidenced in the patriarchs, Jacob and Esau: "'Is not Esau Jacob's brother?' says the Lord. 'Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau'" (1:2). He goes on to point out that the history of Edom, the nation descended from Esau, is quite different from the story of Jacob and Israel.

If we had known these two men we probably would have loved Esau and hated Jacob, for Jacob was the schemer, the operator, the untrustworthy rascal. Esau was the outdoor man, hearty, open, frank and strong. Of the two he appears naturally to be much the better man; but in effect God says, "I love Jacob, because in his heart is a hunger for deeper things than life affords." Jacob wants something more than what is on the surface. That always draws out the heart of God. Esau was a despiser of his birthright and cared nothing for spiritual matters.

God's love for Israel should have drawn from them a response of love in return, but through Malachi God charges the people with their failure to return His love: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name" (1:6). These charges against the priests, which run on through chapter 2, verse 9, reveal in detail how the priests committed sacrilege in offering polluted food on the altar of Jehovah, and manifested greed and covetousness in that none was found willing to open the doors of the Temple without pay; and finally displayed contempt for the whole sacrificial system which manifested itself in sniffing at it as a great weariness of the flesh.

To these accusations the priests respond with great resentment, asking again and again, "How have we?" The punishment of the priests was that they would be made despised and abased before all the people. This is always the reaction of people to hypocrisy in the ministry. There is nothing but contempt for those who claim to be the special ministers of the Lord but whose lives deny God's ways.

In the latter part of chapter 2 the prophet details the sins of the people. The first specific sin was the mixed marriages of the people with the pagan nations around them. Throughout the history of Israel this had always led to the introduction of idolatry and ultimate depravity. These people seemed to have learned nothing from the years of captivity in Babylon, and were again beginning the same practices which had destroyed them as a nation years before.

The second sin was the prevalence of divorce. When the people asked why God did not receive their offerings

any longer, the prophet replies: "And this again you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel" (2:13-16).

This sounds very contemporary, does it not? Malachi had to minister to a nation in which divorce was widespread and, more than that, to a society in which moral confusion and cynicism was rampant. While indulging in easy divorce and mixed marriages, the people were, nevertheless, saying: "Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." This is equivalent to what we often hear today, "God is so loving and merciful that He will not punish sin, but only bless the sinner." Even more up-to-date, some of the people of Malachi's time were asking, "Where is the God of justice?" which is to say, "God does nothing; why should we care?"

But chapter 3 contains the remarkable prediction of the coming Messiah. It begins with the words: "Behold, I send my messenger [in Hebrew that would be, "Behold, I send Malachi"] to prepare the way before me." As we discover in the book of Matthew, that "messenger" was John the Baptist. He came to prepare the way of the Lord, to announce the coming of a second Messenger from God. That second Messenger is now brought before us in Malachi's prediction: "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming says the Lord of hosts" (3:1). This clearly foresees the night when the Lord Jesus took wine and bread with His disciples, and holding the cup said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of trouble to the disciples of Jesus, for they said to Him: "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" The Lord's answer was, "Elijah has already come, and they did not know him" (17:10,12). He saw the look of astonishment on their faces and made it clear that it was John the Baptist who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17) and fulfilled his ministry in that initial coming. Yet Jesus stated this in such a way as to leave the clear inference that Elijah the prophet would actually come before the glorious appearing. Many identify the two witnesses of Revelation 11 as Elijah and Moses, though it is difficult to be dogmatic about that point.

But it is not without significance that at the end of all the literature of the Old Testament the last word is: "curse." The prophecy of Malachi begins: "I have loved you, says the Lord." But it ends with the warning that if the message of love is not received the only alternative is a curse.

Compare that with the last word of the New Testament. Leaving out the final benediction, the last word is the name above all names: "Come, Lord Jesus!" That is God's answer to the curse. Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us! Thus the full answer of God is grace and love which pours out even more blessing, despite man's sin, that we might be brought at last into the light and knowledge of Christ. Thus the supreme task of the Christian is to learn to think upon His name and enjoy the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8).

So the great message of the prophets draws to a close. These sturdy men of God, coming from all walks of life, have been called into activity to reveal the character of God's heart. Through all their severe words and forceful utterances, there runs the revelation that God does not delight in judgment but uses it only that He might waken His people to the reality of where they really are before Him. But the final word is never one of law but of grace. Finally, across the corridors of the centuries, there is always the final scene of glory, where the Son of Righteousness rises with healing in His wings. Thus when Malachi lays down his pen, the next word to be heard from the divine lips is this: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1).

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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