

Lessons from Zechariah

On the wall of an old castle in central Europe a short Latin inscription reads: “Dum spiro, spero!” It means, “As long as I breathe, I have hope!” This saying can summarize the message of Zechariah to God’s people. Nearly 20 years after their return from the Babylonian captivity, discouragement replaced the earlier enthusiasm among those who began to wonder if God was still present among His people.

Zechariah, whose name means “the Lord remembers,” began his prophetic ministry a few months after Haggai began his ministry (Hag. 1:1, Zech. 1:1). Through a series of prophetic visions, Zechariah learned God’s plans for the present and the future. God’s eternal kingdom was coming soon, but the prophet called those who lived in his time to serve the Lord now. A good portion of the book was centered on how they were to do just that. This week, and the next, we will look at what the Lord has revealed to us through him.

Comforting Words of Life

Read Zechariah 1. What is the essential message here? Focus especially on Zechariah 1:3. What is the Lord saying to the people?

The return from the exile to Babylon sparked joy in the hearts of the remnant people. But the return also caused anxiety. Would they be safe and secure in their land, or would enemies come again to harass them? Had God forgiven their past unfaithfulness, or would He continue their punishment? What did the future hold for God’s chosen people and for the nations?

In his vision, Zechariah saw the angel of the Lord move to intercede for Judah. He began with the question, “How long?” In the Bible, this question is often used as an expression of people’s distress and appeal to the Lord for help (Ps. 74:10, Isa. 6:11, Dan. 8:13). The answer to the question came directly through the interpreting angel, who then passed it on to the prophet. It contained words that promised God’s kindness and comfort.

Zechariah was told to proclaim that their Lord was very jealous for Jerusalem (Zech. 1:14). Jealousy can have negative connotations, but in the Bible it can also be an expression of God’s love. God loved His people and expected them to be faithful. In contrast to His love toward Jerusalem, the angel said that the Lord was angry with the nations that had treated His people so harshly. The full charge against the nations was that they added to the calamity of the divine discipline by going too far in their harsh treatment of captives.

Zechariah 1:14 acknowledged God as having been angry, but He promised to repay with comfort. His purpose, which the prophet was commissioned to proclaim, was to return to Jerusalem with compassion. The Lord would comfort Zion (see Isa. 40:1), while His anger would be directed to His enemies. Jerusalem was going to be restored, and it would again be the dwelling place of the Lord.

Look again at Zechariah 1:3. How does one “return” (NIV) unto the Lord? In what ways is this a call for a restored personal relationship between God and His people? How do we (or do we?) “return” unto the Lord every day?

The Lord Is Coming

Read Zechariah 2. It records a vision in which the prophet is shown a renewed Jerusalem, so full of people that it overspreads its walls. It will attract countless Gentiles as well, a

thought that must have sounded very strange to the people. Verse 10 begins with a call to joy, followed by the reason for such jubilation: the personal coming of the Lord to live among His people.

The Lord's dramatic return to dwell in His rebuilt house is cause for praise for those who have returned from exile. Zion, the dwelling place of the great King, is called "Daughter of Zion," a prophetic term of endearment. In view of its glorious prospect, Zion is invited to rejoice, because the Lord Himself will take care of its people. Anyone who touches God's people touches the pupil of His own eye (vs. 8).

The prophet said that in the day of the Lord, many non-Hebrew nations will come and join themselves to the Lord's covenant. God's original plan was that the people of the surrounding nations would see how Israel's service to the true God results in blessings and prosperity; thus, they would be led to join themselves to the Lord. In this way the remnant of Israel and the believing Gentiles would together become one people, in whose midst the Lord Himself dwells. This event would fulfill God's promise to Abram and Sarah that through their posterity, all the nations of the world will be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

How was this prophecy to be fulfilled? (Rom. 15:9-18, Eph. 3:1-8).

Through Zechariah's prophecy, God promises not the destruction of the nations but their inclusion among God's covenant people. The promised future is the result of God's own initiative and was the longing of many biblical prophets. Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news to the whole world of the salvation that is to be found for everyone in Jesus, if they accept it for themselves. The apostle Paul called this plan of the Lord "the mystery hidden for long ages past" (Rom. 16:25, NIV).

How should our understanding of the universality of the gospel message, and the idea that it is for all humanity impact how we live; that is, how much of our lives, our time, and our thoughts are focused on reaching the world with the wonderful truths that we have been given?

God's Readiness to Forgive

Read Zechariah 3. How is the gospel portrayed here?

With, perhaps, the exception of Isaiah 53, no portion of the Old Testament better reveals the wonderful truth of salvation by faith alone than does Zechariah 3. In this vision, the high priest Joshua is being tried on accusations brought forth by the official accuser, Satan. The accusations against the high priest also apply to the nation which he represented. The name Joshua (also spelled as Jeshua) means "the Lord saves" (see Matt. 1:21), and can also be spelled Jesus.

In the Bible, the position of standing on the right side is one of defense and protection. The psalmist says, "I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (Ps. 16:8, NIV; see also Ps. 44:3). In this case, the accuser is doing just the opposite (Ps. 109:6). While Joshua is interceding before God for the people, Satan is bringing accusations against them based on their sinfulness.

The Lord rejects the accusations, reminding the accuser that in His mercy He already has chosen Joshua. Moreover, His people already have suffered the full measure of divine punishment. Joshua and the remnant people were snatched as a burning stick from the destructive fire (Amos 4:11) of long captivity in Babylon.

At the command of the angel of the Lord, Joshua's clothes, which represent people's sins, are removed, and he is cleansed and then given the new festive garments of salvation and righteousness.

Finally, Joshua is commissioned to do God's will and to walk in His ways, an attitude that will result in God's manifold blessings.

"The high priest cannot defend himself or his people from Satan's accusations. He does not claim that Israel is free from fault. In filthy garments, symbolizing the sins of the people, which he bears as their representative, he stands before the Angel, confessing their guilt, yet pointing to their repentance and humiliation, and relying upon the mercy of a sin-pardoning Redeemer. In faith he claims the promises of God."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 583, 584. Those promises, of course, include the covering of Christ's righteousness.

Imagine having to stand before God in your own "filthy garments." What great hope is presented here, and how can you not only claim that hope for yourself but reveal the reality of that hope through a holy and sanctified life?

Not by Human Power

Read Zechariah 4. What hope is being presented to the people?

In this vision, Zechariah sees a lampstand fed by two olive trees, which refers back to the candlestick located in the Holy Place of the wilderness tabernacle (Exod. 25:31-40). The seven lamps are arranged around a large bowl that serves as a reservoir of oil.

The bowl, with its bountiful supply of oil, symbolizes the fullness of God's power through His Spirit. The seven lamps shine with abundant light, a symbol of God's abiding presence, which dispels all darkness. Just as the olive oil is conducted directly from the trees to the bowl of oil at the top of the lampstand without any human agency, so the power which comes from God is constant and sufficient and also needs no human agency.

The message of the vision given to the prophet is that the temple in Jerusalem will soon be rebuilt. God's Spirit, not just human efforts, guarantees the completion of the work. This bold message is given in spite of the fact that the obstacles faced by the builders appear to be as great as a "mountain" (vs. 7).

The prophet is not told who is represented by the lampstand, but we can be sure that the two olive trees represent the two leaders of Judah, Joshua and Zerubbabel. In worldly terms, Zerubbabel's position never could match the royal power and might of his ancestors David and Solomon. From a human point of view, all efforts and resources available to the builders were inadequate. Yet, God's Word promises that a king is not saved by the size of his army, nor warrior by his great strength (Ps. 33:16). In this way the leaders are told that it is only when the Spirit leads that every detail of service can glorify God.

In this prophetic passage, Christians are given an important principle to remember: God may call us to difficult tasks, but through the work of His Spirit He can accomplish His purpose (see Phil. 2:13, 4:13). By the Spirit, God provides the power to do His work now as He did then. This is accomplished not by human might or force but by the Lord working through those who are open to be used by Him.

Read carefully Zechariah 4:6. Why is it so important always to keep in mind our utter dependence upon God? What can happen when we forget that all that we have, or can do, comes only from the Lord and His power working in us?

Beyond Fasting

During Zechariah's third year of ministry, a delegation from Bethel came to Jerusalem to ask the priests and the prophets a question (see Zech. 7:1-3). When they were in exile in Babylon, the people fasted during the fifth month to mourn the destruction of the temple (2 Kings 25:8-9). This was in addition to the fasts held in the fourth, seventh, and the tenth months (Zech. 8:19). In the fourth month, the breaching of the wall of Jerusalem was remembered (Jer. 39:2). The fast in the seventh month, the Day of Atonement, was the only fasting day commanded by God through Moses (see Leviticus 16). Finally, in the tenth month, the people mourned the siege against Jerusalem (Jer. 39:1). Because the exile was now over and the temple reconstruction almost was complete, the people wondered if it still was necessary to fast in the fifth month.

Read the Lord's answer to them (Zech. 7:8-14). In what ways can the words here be applied to ourselves?

God's answer through Zechariah is twofold: first, it is necessary that God's people remember the past so that they do not repeat it. The Lord had warned the ancestors that He expected them to live in trust and obedience. The exile was punishment for their persistent rebellion. So, the people are summoned to learn from their past mistakes. Second, the Lord does not take delight in people's hunger. When they fast and humble themselves before God, repentance and humility need to be reflected in what they do. To fast in order to feel sorry for oneself is a waste of time and effort. Fasting, among other things, should represent the kind of death to self needed in order to be able to put self aside and reach out and minister to the needs of others. "The spirit of true fasting and prayer is the spirit which yields mind, heart, and will to God."—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, p. 189.

What are ways in which we can make valid religious practices, such as fasting and even prayer, become substitutes for what true Christian faith should be about? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Study: "Satan knows that those who ask God for pardon and grace will obtain it; therefore he presents their sins before them to discourage them. Against those who are trying to obey God, he is constantly seeking occasion for complaint. Even their best and most acceptable service he seeks to make appear corrupt. By countless devices, the most subtle and the most cruel, he endeavours to secure their condemnation.

"In his own strength, man cannot meet the charges of the enemy. In sin-stained garments, confessing his guilt, he stands before God. But Jesus, our Advocate, presents an effectual plea in behalf of all who by repentance and faith have committed the keeping of their souls to Him. He pleads their cause, and by the mighty arguments of Calvary, vanquishes their accuser. His perfect obedience to God's law has given Him all power in heaven and in earth, and He claims from His Father mercy and reconciliation for guilty man. To the accuser of His people He declares: 'The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan. These are the purchase of My blood, brands plucked from the burning.' And to those who rely on Him in faith, He gives the assurance, 'Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and

I will clothe thee with change of raiment.' Zechariah 3:4."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 586, 587.

t the heart of the biblical message lies the most beautiful story ever told, that of the Creator God, who, in the person of His Son, left the glory of heaven to save humanity from sin and death. In the second half of Zechariah there are several Messianic prophecies—Old Testament prophetic promises about Jesus—the One who did all this for us.

These specific promises first were given to God's people who lived in Zechariah's perilous times in order to keep them focused on the promise of redemption. Although the original context of these prophecies never should be ignored, their importance never should be confined to the past fulfillments either. Instead, we will look at the ways in which they were fulfilled in Jesus, fulfillments that are universal, not local, because they impact the ultimate destiny of the world and not just ancient Israel and Judah.

"The Robe of a Jew"

Beginning with chapter 8, the book of Zechariah takes a radical turn. A series of messages sent from the Lord tells the future of the world and the role of God's people in it. Some of the passages from these chapters are not easy to understand, but the ultimate future is clearly positive.

Read Zechariah 8. What principles can you learn from there that have relevance for us, as Seventh-day Adventists, and the calling from God that we have been given?

God's plan was that Jerusalem would again be a safe place in which old people would sit in the streets filled with playful boys and girls (Zech. 8:4-5). To those who inhabited a city overrun by conquerors, the promise of streets safe for young and old sounded like a dream.

Instead of remaining forever a small subordinate nation, God's people were to be a magnet to which nations would be drawn in order to worship the Lord, King of the whole earth (Zech. 14:9). The use of the expression "all languages" (NIV) in Zechariah 8:23 indicates that the prophecy envisioned a universal movement.

Like Isaiah (Isaiah 2) and Isaiah's contemporary Micah (Micah 4), Zechariah was shown by God that the day would come when a multitude of people from many cities and nations would go up to Jerusalem to pray and seek the Lord. God's presence in Zion generally will be recognized, as will His blessings on those who worship Him.

The gospel accounts tell that these Messianic promises began to be fulfilled through the ministry of Jesus Christ. On one occasion, for example, Jesus said that when He is lifted up from the earth, He "will draw all peoples" to Himself (John 12:32, NKJV).

The church of Christ, also called the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), is privileged in our time to have a part in this mission. We are to carry the light of salvation to the ends of the earth. In this way the people of God can be a great blessing to the world.

Read especially Zechariah 8:16-17. At a time when our church is seeking revival and reformation, how can we learn to avoid these things, which God says He hates?

The King of Peace

Read Zechariah 9:9. How does the New Testament apply this to Jesus? See Matt. 21:9, Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:38, John 12:13-15.

Jesus' triumphal entry consisted of the future King riding on a donkey into Jerusalem. In the Bible, rejoicing and shouting for joy especially is associated with the celebration of God as King (Psalms 47, 96, 98). This gentle Ruler will bring righteousness, salvation, and lasting peace, and His dominion will stretch to the ends of the earth.

When Jesus triumphantly rode a donkey into Jerusalem only days before His death, a great number of people cheered His coming. Some rejoiced, hoping that Christ would overthrow Rome's power and establish God's kingdom in Jerusalem. But instead of allowing Himself to be Israel's king, Jesus died on the cross and then rose from His grave. There is no question that He disappointed many of His followers, those who sought a more militaristic leader. Little did they know, however, that what they wanted was nothing in comparison to what they were going to get through the death of Jesus instead.

"Christ was following the Jewish custom for a royal entry. The animal on which He rode was that ridden by the kings of Israel, and prophecy had foretold that thus the Messiah should come to His kingdom. No sooner was He seated upon the colt than a loud shout of triumph rent the air. The multitude hailed Him as Messiah, their King. Jesus now accepted the homage which He had never before permitted, and the disciples received this as proof that their glad hopes were to be realized by seeing Him established on the throne. The multitude were convinced that the hour of their emancipation was at hand."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 570.

Much has been written about how, when things looked good, the crowd was all enthusiastic about Jesus; when things did not go right, however, many in that same crowd turned away from Him (some even openly against Him). What can we learn from this incident about the danger of false expectations? You claim a promise for healing, for instance, or for victory over a sin, and you do not see it as you expected. How can we develop a faith that will not fail, even when things do not go as hoped, expected, or even prayed for?

The One Pierced

Zechariah chapters 12-14 reveal several things that could have happened had Israel been faithful to God. First, the Lord would have brought total victory over the powers of evil and the hostile nations that had tried to oppose His plan of salvation (Zech. 12:1-9). Although Jerusalem was to be God's instrument toward this triumph, the victory itself would have come from the Lord's intervention. In the end, the enemy would have been utterly defeated and destroyed.

Zechariah 12:10 marks the transition of the movement from physical deliverance, from what would have happened had Israel been faithful, to spiritual deliverance of God's faithful people. Following the victory, God's people would embrace their Lord. God's Spirit of grace and supplication would be poured on the leaders and the people. This convicting work of the Spirit would result in far-reaching repentance and spiritual revival, something that our church itself is seeking.

As God pours out His Spirit, His people look upon the One whom they have pierced and mourn for Him as one mourns the death of an only son. The original Hebrew word for

“pierced” always describes some type of physical violence, usually resulting in death (Num. 25:8, 1 Sam. 31:4). The poignancy of people’s grief is heightened by the realization that their own sins caused Jesus Christ’s death.

Read Zechariah 12:10. How did the apostle John connect this passage with Christ’s crucifixion and His second coming? See John 19:37, Rev. 1:7.

Interestingly enough, one traditional Jewish interpretation holds that this verse points to the experience of the Messiah. They are, of course, right: it is talking about Jesus and His death on the cross (compare with Isaiah 53).

“The scenes of Calvary call for the deepest emotion. Upon this subject you will be excusable if you manifest enthusiasm. That Christ, so excellent, so innocent, should suffer such a painful death, bearing the weight of the sins of the world, our thoughts and imaginations can never fully comprehend.”—Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2, p. 213. How can you grow in your appreciation of what His death means to you and what it offers you?

The Good Shepherd

For centuries both Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible have found in Zechariah’s book numerous references to the Messiah and messianic times. Christians, of course, have understood that these passages apply to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ: the triumphant yet peaceful King (Zech. 9:9), the One who was pierced (Zech. 12:10), the Shepherd who was struck down (Zech. 13:7).

In Zechariah 13:7-9 the prophet is shown a scene in which the sword of the Lord’s judgment goes out against the Good Shepherd. On a previous occasion the prophet saw the sword being raised against a “worthless shepherd” (Zech. 11:17, NIV). But here in this passage the Good Shepherd is struck, and the flock becomes scattered. His death results in a great trial and testing of God’s people, during which some perish; yet, all of the faithful are refined.

Read Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. How did Jesus apply this prophecy to that which was going to happen that night? More important, what should that whole incident, that of the disciples fleeing in the face of adversity (see Matt. 26:56 and Mark 14:50), teach us about the faithfulness of God in contrast to human unfaithfulness?

The image of God as a shepherd is found in many places in the Bible. It begins with the book of Genesis (Gen. 48:15, NIV) and ends with Revelation (Rev. 7:17). Through Ezekiel, God rebuked the irresponsible shepherds of His people and promised to search for the lost sheep and take care of them. Applying these words to Himself, Jesus declared that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Think of times in which you have been unfaithful to the Lord. Despite that, how does He continue to show you mercy and grace? What must be your response to that mercy and grace?

King of the Whole World

Read Zechariah 14. How are we to understand that which is being said there?

In the last chapter of his book, Zechariah describes a day when all unrepentant nations will gather themselves against Jerusalem. At the last moment, the Lord will intervene by

liberating His people and establishing His eternal kingdom on earth. After all who oppose Him are destroyed, all nations will worship the one true God. The Lord will be king over the whole world. He will be one Lord and His name will be exalted above all names. The great "I AM" expresses all God is and always will be. Though these things were to have happened had Israel remained faithful, they still will be fulfilled but on a grander scale, during the final redemption of God's people everywhere.

When Zechariah announced the coming of the Messiah, he did not draw a line of separation between His first and second comings. As was the case with other prophets, he saw the coming kingdom of the Messiah as one glorious future. Only in the light of Christ's first coming can we now distinguish between the two comings. We also can feel gratitude for everything He accomplished for our salvation on Calvary. So, we can look forward with joy in anticipation of God's eternal kingdom (see Dan. 7:14).

The closing section of this prophetic book describes Jerusalem in its glory, exalted, filled with people, and secure. The saved from all nations will participate in the worship of the eternal King. The entire city of Jerusalem will be filled with the holiness of the temple.

When these glorious promises are studied together with the overall teaching of the Bible, we come to the conclusion that the ultimate fulfillment of these predictions will take place in the New Jerusalem, where God's people from everywhere will come together and worship Him forever. This all happens only after the second coming of Jesus. The themes of their perpetual praises will be God's salvation, His goodness and power, just as the famous Song of the Sea concludes: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (Exod. 15:18, NKJV). Ancient prophets and faithful people from the past all looked with eager anticipation toward this climactic event.

Dwell on the ultimate redemption that is promised to us—a new heaven and a new earth with no sin, death, suffering, or loss. What are all the reasons you have for this hope, and how can you keep them before you daily, especially in times of trouble, fear, and pain?

Further Study:

"In the darkest days of her long conflict with evil, the church of God has been given revelations of the eternal purpose of Jehovah. His people have been permitted to look beyond the trials of the present to the triumphs of the future, when, the warfare having been accomplished, the redeemed will enter into possession of the promised land. These visions of future glory, scenes pictured by the hand of God, should be dear to His church today, when the controversy of the ages is rapidly closing and the promised blessings are soon to be realized in all their fullness. . . .

"The nations of the saved will know no other law than the law of heaven. All will be a happy, united family, clothed with the garments of praise and thanksgiving. Over the scene the morning stars will sing together, and the sons of God will shout for joy, while God and Christ will unite in proclaiming, 'There shall be no more sin, neither shall there be any more death.'"—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 722, 732, 733.