

Sermon Notes, Zechariah 1:1-6, Sunday 6th Sept 2026

The theme-tune for the sitcom Friends: "So no one told you life was going to be this way. Your job's a joke, you're broke, your love life's DOA. It's like you're always stuck in second gear, When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year. Your mother warned you there'd be days like these, But she didn't tell you when the world has brought you down to your knees."

How do you cope with seasons of discouragement in life? Maybe you do turn to your friends. Eat lots of ice cream? Keep busy? Exercise?

Christians are not exempt. You've got a relationship with God which throws in extra questions. No one told me Christian life was going to be this way? Have I done something wrong? Am I being punished?

What should I do?

If that's you, or ever could be, then Zechariah is the book for you. It's a great book for the people of God whenever we're discouraged by failure, hardship or sin.

The Historical Background

Things have gone badly wrong.

In the 15th century BC, God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan to live in. The people rebelled, worshipped other gods, and did not live by the good laws God had given them. God gave them lots of warnings through the prophets, but eventually they lost all God's blessings. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 and deported all the educated people to Babylon.

But God had promised the exile would end. His promises to Abraham, Moses and David still stood. In 539 Cyrus king of Persia conquered Babylon. Persia was now the biggest superpower in the region. Cyrus sent the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple.

No sooner had they started than they met opposition. In 536, the building ground to a halt. Ezra 4:24. For about 15 years, nothing happened. In 522, Darius I became king, and in 520 the building work restarted. Ezra 5:1-2.

That's when Zechariah ministered. Discouraging time. People poor, tiny (42k down from hundreds of thousands), surrounded by ruins of their land and a half-built temple.

What God has to say to his people at a time like that? Read Haggai and Zechariah.

There's a difference of emphasis. Haggai is about the need to rebuild the temple. Zechariah is about the need to rebuild their hearts.

Zechariah is God's word to his sad, dispirited people.

We're going to let verses 2 and 3 guide us through Zechariah's message. God says three things to his broken people.

1. I was very angry

Verse 2.

It's an abrupt start to Zechariah. Notice what he doesn't say: "I'm very angry with you".

He's giving them a history lesson. I was angry with them. Don't be like them. We'll see how they're not to be like them in a moment. Story of God's anger developed in 6 stages.

1. God spoke to them. Verse 4a.

2. Specifically, God told them to repent. Verse 4b.

I'm not sure what the difference is between evil ways and their evil practices. It doesn't really matter. Repenting isn't just feeling a bit sorry. It's actively stopping the things we do that don't please God. Stop the wrong priorities. Stop the wrong

3. They didn't listen. Verse 4c. Here's the question for Zechariah's hearers. God's word goes out to them too. Will they repeat the mistake, or will they listen?

4. They're gone. Verse 5. God judged them as he said he would. The prophets who spoke to them are gone too. Even God's faithful prophets die eventually. None of us lives forever. God's word lives on whether we listen or not.

5. Disaster overtook them. Verse 6a. It's powerful language – God's word overtook them. Two ways to put that in modern English. (a) They thought God's warning of judgement didn't apply to them, but God caught up with them in the end. (b) They thought they could escape God's judgement, but God's word outran them and caught up with them.

The God who spoke to them is immensely powerful. You keep getting this title for God: The Lord Almighty. 65x in Haggai and Zechariah. Literally, the God of armies. The God who commands the armies of heaven. It's a title that emphasises God's great power. God and his word are powerful. If someone ignores God's warnings, God's word overtakes them and sweeps them away.

Stage 6. They repented. Verse 6b. This could be the people Zechariah's talking to who repented, but I'm persuaded God's still talking about their ancestors. Disaster overtook them. They ended up in exile, lost everything. *Then* they sat down and said "we deserved it". They repented when it was too late.

2021 volcanic eruption on La Palma. Amazingly only 1 person died (repairing his roof). Why so few died? Over 1000 buildings destroyed, but they evacuated people they thought could be at risk. They evacuated too many. Better safe than sorry. You get the warning, you leave. Don't be the person who thinks the warning doesn't apply to you. Don't leave it to the last minute, and hope you can run faster than the lava. It would catch you. Happily, people took the warning, and many lives were spared.

Their ancestors did *not* believe the warning. God's words overtook them and it was too late.

2. Return to me

Verse 3a

Notice what God doesn't say.

1. God does not tell the people to turn away from particular sins. In verse 4, God mentioned the earlier prophets (like Isaiah or Jeremiah). They accused their ancestors of specific sins: idolatry and injustice.

Haggai addressed the same people as Zechariah. He accused them of sorting out their own homes while God's temple was half finished.

Zechariah doesn't say "turn from". He says "turn to me."

2. God doesn't tell them to get building. Haggai said that. And Zechariah's ministry got them building. But it's not Zechariah's focus.

God's message to his people, surrounded by rubble, dejected: "Return to me".

This is positive not negative. "Turn to" not "turn from".

This is their heart not the law. It's not "keep these rules". It's come to me. It's relational.

Don't hear me saying more than I am. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai told the people to repent of lots of things. God told their ancestors to repent of their evil ways. God meant it. You cannot turn to the holy God without turning away from the things he says he hates.

All of this is a lot like Jesus. Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus has some punchy demands. His teaching is more challenging than anything in the Old Testament. Learn from him. His yoke. His burden. But the core of his message is this: "Come to me!"

This is what God has to say to his weary people. They're sat amongst the ruins. They've had 15 lost years when nothing got built. And Zechariah speaks to them to put them back on their feet. "Return to me."

That's what we all need to hear. However long you've been a Christian, there will be bits of you pulling you in all sorts of directions. Our hearts are never fully devoted to God. Every single day, this is God's call to us: "Return to me."

We especially what we need to hear when we're weary, having a hard season in life. God will have lots of things to say to you. But his first message is not: "Stop sinning". Not: "Try harder". It's, "return to me."

Peter had a bad weekend once. He'd denied the Jesus he'd spent three years with, and then Jesus had been killed by the Romans. He went back to his fishing. Then Jesus went for a walk with him along a beach. Jesus got to the point where he'd tell Peter to feed his sheep. But that's not where he started. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?". "Simon, do you love me?" "Do you love me?"

More than anything God wants your heart. He calls out to us: "Do you love me? Return to me"

3. I will return to you

There's a promise attached to verse 3. Verse 3.

This is an astonishing promise. But you could miss that.

It's amazing for two reasons. First, there is one word that you get 4 times in this passage. Verse 3 (twice), verse 4, verse 6. The same word. God tells the people to turn, to repent. And if they do, he will match them. God will do what they do. He will return to them. Almost, he will repent, turn around. Extraordinary.

Second, if you turn your back on God, what would you expect God to do if you come back? It might be that we're so familiar with God's loving kindness that we say, "of course he'd have us back". Not so fast. God is holy. There's no "of course" with God. Indeed, this was the mistake their ancestors had made. "No, he wouldn't abandon us and judge us!".

No, if you've grasped how holy God is and how offensive your sin is, you'd expect him to turn his back for good. Which is why this promise is so extraordinary. "Return to me, and I will return to you."

That's why we had the parable of the prodigal son read. The younger son decides to go home. He expects to be treated as a servant. If he's lucky. What does he find? His dad runs out to meet him. It turns out his dad was even more keen to have him back than he was to come back.

This is the promise of the Christian gospel. If we turn back to God, he'll come out to meet us and gather us home.

It's easy to forget this, especially if you're having a bad day, or week, or month, or year. We need to hear both halves of verse 3. This is what we have to believe if we're going to turn back to God: "Return to me, and I will return to you."

Conclusion

Let me address those who are not yet Christians. Jesus consistently taught that he would return to this world one day to judge us all. If God kicked his people out of their land and took away all their privileges, do you think those who *aren't* his people will escape.

Don't think God's judgement doesn't apply to you. Don't think you'll outrun God. Don't be like the ancestors of Zechariah's audience, who only heard God's call *after* it was too late to respond. God calls you to turn from your evil ways and your evil practices, and to turn to him. And if you do, he will return to you.

For the rest of us, we need to repent daily of our sin, but God wants our hearts. Every day, return to him. And every day, he will return to you.

There might be seasons when we need this especially. If you've drifted from God, given up on him, stopped responding to his voice, then he's calling you back. And if all you can see are the things that are going wrong in life, or the burdens you cannot carry, this is where God meets you.

"Let me have your heart. Return to me, once again. And I will return to you."