

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Zechariah

January 25, 2015

DOES GOD GIVE SECOND CHANCES?

The Need for Second Chances

Some of our most beloved stories are about people being given second chances – from the conversation of Christian in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to the reformation of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*. One is about a man who has played out his hand in the City of Destruction. The other is about a rich, miserly recluse. But even people like them need another chance.

What about you?

Are there situations at work or home, at school or church, that you have simply blown? Have you failed in your friendships or family? Has a precious opportunity passed you by? Have you spoken destructive words that appear to be irrevocable, forever closing off this possibility or that hope?

Let me take it a step further: I wonder if that is how you feel in your relationship with God. I wonder if you attend church on Sundays and join in by singing praise songs and hymns but you simultaneously feel that you have blown it with the one you are singing about.

Introducing Zechariah

Zechariah is the longest Minor Prophet. It takes about thirty-five minutes to read the whole book out loud. Yet he is also the most obscure minor prophet. Old Testament professor Douglas Stuart has said that most people find it “an especially difficult read, even for a prophetic book.”

Zechariah began prophesying at the same time as Haggai – in 520 B.C. Like Haggai, he exhorted the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem to get on with rebuilding the temple of the Lord. Through a series of eight visions, two sermons, and two oracles, God used Zechariah to tell God’s people that they would have a second chance! We will look at the book in these three natural sections.

Chapters 1-6, which are taken up by eight visions, describe the second chance God would provide through *his rule*.

Chapters 7-8, comprised of two sermons, describe the second chance God would give through *his Word*.

Chapters 9-14, made up of two oracles, describe the second chance God would offer through *his Son*.

I pray that as we study this book, you will discover what second chance God may have in store for you.

God Will Give a Second Chance Through His Rule

First, we find that God gave his people a second chance through his rule.

As we saw in our study of Haggai, life for the Jews in the last part of the sixth century B.C. felt disjointed and uncertain, especially in their relationship with God. They were back in the land of Palestine, but it was easy to wonder whether God would re-own them as his own people. After all, he had exiled them so dramatically to Babylon. Would he give them a second chance? From the book's opening words, it sounds as if he would.

Zechariah 1:1-6

The basic imperative for this book is there in verse 3: "return to me." That seems to imply a second chance!

The first six chapters of this book are presented as a series of eight visions. By themselves, the visions are difficult to understand.

- "The Man Among the Myrtle Trees" (1:8-17)
- "Four Horns and Four Craftsmen" (1:18-21)
- "A Man With a Measuring Line" (chapter 2)
- "Clean Garments for the High Priest" (chapter 3)
- "The Gold Lampstand and the Two Olive Trees" (chapter 4)
- "The Flying Scroll" (5:1-4)
- "The Woman in a Basket" (5:5-11)
- "Four Chariots" (6:1-8)

In short, the eight visions present a picture of the whole world at peace under the rule of God's anointed priest and king.

Which is who Christ is! Jesus Christ, the anointed one, would be the great high priest and king whose kingdom would not be of this world. His rule was the great hope that the Lord held out to his beleaguered and uncertain people through these eight visions given to Zechariah.

The Bible says that God created us to acknowledge his rule, which is why you and I have a conscience. And God promises to judge us for how we have responded to his rule.

One day the whole world will be ruled by God. The God of Zechariah is no mere tribal deity. He is "the Lord of the whole world" (6:5). The entire world is his concern.

So what does this mean for us as Christians? Mainly, it means that we have hope. It means that we will never encounter circumstances too great for this God to handle. When we can see no more reason to hope, our faith in Christ shows us a new basis and cause for hope.

We are not lectured about a bunch of stuff that we are supposed to do. Rather, we are shown what God is going to do. He will rule his world. He will judge his people's enemies. He will dwell with his people and protect them. He will send his Messiah and cleanse the guilt of his people. He will purge and purify his people, separating them from their own evils. So comprehensive is God's Lordship.

In case your circumstances have not already taught you the lesson, know that the basis of your hope is not in yourself. Our hope is in who God is, what he has done, and what he promises to do.

God Will Give a Second Chance Through His Word

Second, God will give a second chance through his Word. This is what we learn in the two sermons in chapters 7 and 8, both of which begin with the phrase, "the word of the Lord came" (7:1; 8:1).

Zechariah 7:1, 8-14

This is the first of two messages that came to Zechariah, probably two years after the eight visions of chapters 1-6. And these two messages are quite different. The first message, which we have just read, looks back and explains why God sent the people of Judah into exile. It theologically interprets their history and points to their disobedience to God's demands.

In a deliberate contrast, the second sermon – comprising chapter 8 – looks forward and describes what God will do for his people according to his grace. If the first sermon explains how terrible consequences had overtaken them because they had ignored God's Word, the second sermon explains how God will reestablish his people according to his grace. In short, he will give them a new beginning – a fresh start.

The chapter begins
Zechariah 8:1-8

Chapter 8 adds more to the picture of a people at peace presented in the visions of the first six chapters (1:11; 2:4). We learn that God will be the one who gives this prosperity to his people according to his promises. This future will be marked by truth and love. Jerusalem will be called “the City of Truth” (8:3), and the people are instructed to “Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely” (8:16-17). They are also enjoined to “love truth and peace” (8:19).

Zechariah's prophecy is largely devoid of instructions for telling us what we should do. The two exceptions occur in the middle of chapters 7 and 8, where God instructed his people to live in a way that would honor him by their love and truth. In chapter 7, he told them, “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other” (7:9-10). Yet Israel refused to follow these commands, which is why they were exiled. Still, these commands revealed something of God's heart.

God Will Give a Second Chance Through His Son

Third, God will give a second chance through his Son.

The last six chapters of Zechariah are divided into two oracles. Chapters 9-11 comprise the first, while chapters 12-14 comprise the second. Both oracles begin with the promise of judgment on Israel's enemies (9:1-8; 12:1-9). Next, both oracles point to the One who would come. In the first oracle he is called Israel's

“king,” the “Lord,” and a shepherd (9:9, 16; 11:4-9). In the second oracle he is called “the one they have pierced” and a “shepherd” (12:10; 13:7).

Thus far, the two oracles match one another: a promise of judgment on the nations, followed by the provision of the good shepherd.

At this point, however, their paths diverge. The first oracle ends with the divine shepherd-king being detested by the flock: they reject him (11:8). This figure is also rejected in the second oracle. In fact, the description is far worse: he is pierced and struck (12:10; 13:7), implying that he dies. Yet this second oracle does not end with the divine shepherd-king’s rejection. In chapter 14, the prophet describes a celebration of the day of the Lord and the consummation of the kingdom. As in the first two sections of Zechariah’s book that we have already examined, this third section ends with the Lord reigning (14:9).

There is so much in this little book of Zechariah about Christ. It is quoted more than any other book of the Old Testament in the Gospels’ accounts of the crucifixion. Christ is the Good Shepherd. Christ is the rejected one. Christ is the One who was pierced and stricken. One of the most amazing and commented upon verses in the whole Old Testament occurs in chapter 12. The Lord says....

Zechariah 12:10

What an extraordinary verse. What on earth would a Jewish prophet who has been taught monotheism in the sixth century B.C. be doing, putting these words into the mouth of God and speaking it to priests? *They will look on me, the one they have pierced!* In his gospel, the apostle John recounts the crucifixion and includes the story of the soldier who pierced Jesus’ side with a spear. And he quotes this passage from Zechariah and declares it fulfilled (John 19:34-37).

Conclusion

Zechariah is summed up in the third verse of the book: ‘tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the Lord Almighty’ (1:3). Their return would be both an acknowledgment and a working out of God’s rightful sovereignty.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is there any area of your life in which you feel that you have blown it with God? Some area where he would never give you a second chance? Where?

2. Would the people in your life who know you and depend on you (spouse, children, employees, friends) say that you are someone who gives second chances? How does giving second chances to those who depend on us commend the gospel?
3. If so many kinds of knowledge can “puff up” our egos, why does a true knowledge of God humble us?
4. What, more than anything else, shows us that God is a God of second chances?

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)