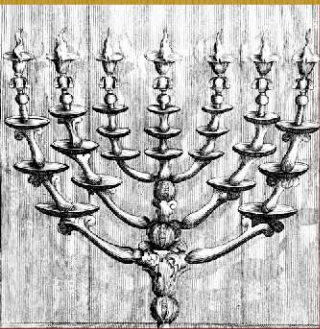




Zechariah



REFORMED
EXPOSITORY
COMMENTARY

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

Zechariah

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
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Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Zechariah

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS


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To

*Sinclair B. Ferguson, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., William S. Barker,
William Edgar, and my other teachers in divinity
and pastoral ministry at
Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia
With thanks for their zeal for truth, reverence for God's Word,
and love for Christ*

and to

*The Lord Jesus Christ, "The Branch . . . who shall build
the temple of the LORD" (Zech. 6:12).*

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commen-

Series Introduction

taries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are

devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

I was first motivated to study and teach Zechariah because of the strong connection between Israel's postexilic setting and the situation of Christian believers in a postmodern world. Both of us look back on a legacy that is both glorious and tragically disappointing. We have ample reasons to see the faithfulness and power of God, along with concerns regarding the worldliness and weakness of God's people. Many of us experience this individually. How do we think about our victories and failures? How do we approach God and face the future with confidence, trusting him while being realistic about ourselves? To the believers of Zechariah's day and ours, God calls out in grace: "Return to me, and I will return to you" (Zech. 1:3).

The people to whom God commissioned Zechariah as a prophet are not often considered heroes of the Bible. This book does not present the mightiness of a man like Moses, or the fidelity of a Joshua, or even the heart of a king like David. Zechariah recounts no famous battles in which God's people cast down their enemies and claimed his Promised Land. Instead, Zechariah presents a people whose record has been disgraced by sin and whose covenant with God lay broken—a reality amply illustrated by the ruins of Jerusalem to which they returned, with its broken-down temple. This is why Zechariah's message is so important to our time. Do people who have failed God—people surrounded not with the scenes of spiritual advance but rather besieged by spiritual collapse—have a book in the Bible for them? The whole Bible is for everyone, of course. But people who long to start over with God, and a generation that wonders if the flame of bygone years can be relit, find a message particularly suited to their needs in the book of Zechariah.

In truth, although this book claims few epic heroes, the believers of Zechariah's time were very much like earlier Bible champions. They resembled

Preface

Moses as he knelt before the burning bush, doubting his ability to serve as Israel's redeemer. Like Joshua as he stepped into Moses' shoes, they needed the encouragement of a divine commissioning. Like King David, it was their love for God that led them into their hardships. Their battles of faith were every bit as important as the conquests of earlier heroes. The shattered city they labored to rebuild was as beloved to God as Jerusalem had ever been. And the temple they rebuilt, though not outwardly as glorious as the original of Solomon's day, would serve just as truly to bring the people into God's presence for worship. The reality is that God always uses failures to do his work: it is his gracious delight to call, atone, restore, and equip weak and sinful people to bring glory to himself. This is true because the hero of Zechariah is none other than Jesus Christ, whose portraits fill this prophecy with a depth and vibrancy unsurpassed anywhere else in the Old Testament.

This is a message we all need to hear: by God's grace in Christ, the role he has assigned to us is no less significant than the greatest deeds ever performed by God's choicest saints. Like Zechariah's generation, God would lift up our heads with a fresh vision of his message of old: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD" (Zech. 4:6). May God bless all who read these studies with refreshment to hope in God's grace and with strength for the work he has given each of us to do.

These messages were first preached in the evening services of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from November 2000 to July 2001, and again as an evening series at First Presbyterian Church of Coral Springs/Margate, Florida, in 2005 and 2006. I thank these wonderful congregations, and am especially grateful to their sessions for the time they permit me for careful study and preparation. I am also appreciative of Philip Ryken and Iain Duguid, whose editorial labors have measurably improved the quality of this book. This commentary is dedicated to the staff and faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, with gratitude for my priceless years of study there and for the lifelong influence this great institution has exercised on my ministry.

Additionally, I give praise to God for the devoted ministry of my dear wife Sharon, not merely for her unflagging support, but also for the delight she brings into my life, and for the godly joys of our children: Hannah, Matthew, Jonathan, Ellie, and Lydia. Lastly, I give thanks to the Lord of hosts, whose grace in Christ is truly new every morning and new in every generation. To him be glory forever.

§ *Zechariah*

RETURN TO ME

PART 1



The Eight Night Visions

1

RETURN TO ME

Zechariah 1:1–6

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

(Zech. 1:2–3)



One of the great questions of life is “How do we start again?” It is a question every sinner faces at one time or another. Broken marriages face the question, as do broken friendships and broken dreams. It was a question pressing hard upon the people of Judah in the time of the postexilic prophet Zechariah, who was charged with speaking for God to a people trying to start over again. Theirs was a broken relationship with God, a broken covenant. Having returned from bondage in far-off Babylon, their generation was asking, “How do we start again?”

The opening passage of this book clues us into the approach this prophet takes. Beginning in verse 2 of chapter 1, Zechariah points the people to the Lord. Three times in two verses he confronts them with the name “the Lord Almighty.” In order to deal with the past, and therefore with the present and the future, he says, the people would have to turn to God. That is always true.

The power to heal what is broken, to start again what is ended, and to raise up what is cast down is always and only found with the Lord. “How do we get right with God, and what will it mean to us if we do?” That is where Zechariah begins, and that was the issue facing those who had come back to the Lord to start over again.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ZECHARIAH

We should begin our study of Zechariah by specifying the approaches that will enable us to interpret this book of Scripture rightly. First, we will approach Zechariah *historically*. We should always be historical in our study of Scripture, since the books of the Bible were given by God through actual men in the context of real circumstances and settings. As a result, our study of Zechariah will increase our knowledge of Old Testament history. We will become familiar with important figures unknown to many Christians: Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah; Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel of the house of David and ancestor to our Lord Jesus; the high priest Joshua, of the line of Zadok; as well as Zechariah and his prophetic colleague Haggai.

Second, we will consider this book *doctrinally*. While this and every book of Scripture comes to us out of a historical setting, it also is part of the whole Bible given by God for our instruction in salvation. The book of Zechariah has a great many truths to set before us, doctrines of our faith that were at a particular stage of development in the progress of God’s redemptive work. We want to take stock of its teaching both in light of how it was then presented and how the various subjects would ultimately be rounded out in the completed canon of Scripture.

Third—and this is a strong emphasis in the book of Zechariah—we will approach this material *christologically*. We will trace the line of thought as it leads to Jesus Christ, the Messiah anticipated by the Old Testament, and the Savior who fulfills its promises and answers its questions. So frequent and dramatic are the pointers to Christ in Zechariah that the book might be dubbed *The Gospel according to Zechariah*. It is sometimes said that the gospel is in the Old Testament *concealed* and in the New Testament *revealed*. When we get to the book of Zechariah, Christ is barely concealed but often blatantly revealed to the eyes of those trained by the later revelations of the New Testament.

Fourth, we will approach this book from a *practical* perspective, applying its message to our own setting and lives so as to derive its full benefit. Though we are separated by time and circumstances from the prophet and his generation, the issues of faith and godliness have not ultimately changed. Everything God revealed in this book for individuals and for Israel as a whole finds a contemporary application for Christians and the church.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF ZECHARIAH

First, let us consider the historical setting from which this book of Scripture comes to us. A good place to start is in the year 586 BC, when the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar seized and destroyed the Israelite capital, Jerusalem. This was an event long portended in the prophetic writings, most nearly by the prophet Jeremiah, whose title, “the weeping prophet,” was earned from his participation in those horrible events. At the beginning of his prophecy, Jeremiah explained all that was going to take place, and why:

The LORD said to me, “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the LORD, and they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah. And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands.” (Jer. 1:14–16)

Despite warning after warning, from prophet after prophet, the day finally came when the Lord brought judgment upon his people for their sins, and especially the sin of idolatry to which they were so addicted. At the end, the situation was as described in Jeremiah’s brokenhearted book of Lamentations: “How lonely sits the city that was full of people! . . . The LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe” (Lam. 1:1, 5).

Jerusalem lay in ruins, empty, her walls torn down, and her buildings scorched with fire. Thus concluded a key stage in the history of God’s people, one brilliantly begun in the exodus, gloriously advanced under King David, but brought to ruin by the sins of his hardhearted people. Despite

Return to Me

their status as God's people, despite God's presence in their midst, despite the institutions of the theocracy, the temple and the royal palace, and despite the holy hill of Zion where Israel worshiped, even the Israelites were not spared the judgment for their sins. The fall of Jerusalem stands as a lasting testimony to the folly of presumption and the wages of sin.

The Israelites went into exile, to weep by the waters of Babylon while the Promised Land was inhabited by other people (Ps. 137:1). Yet God promised grace to his people in their sorrow. Through Jeremiah he said:

For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you. (Jer. 29:10–14)¹

Other prophecies of hope came from the latter chapters of Isaiah, written about two hundred years beforehand. So specific were Isaiah's predictions that he even named the ruler who would restore the fortunes of Israel: "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free" (Isa. 45:13 NIV).

Liberal critics of Scripture use this prediction to claim a postexilic dating for the latter chapters of Isaiah, presupposing that actual foretelling is impossible. But God's expressed purpose was to give confidence to his people at a time when many would have wondered about his ability to save. When this specific prediction was fulfilled, it was a staggering proof of God's sovereignty. "I am God," he insisted, "and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'" (Isa. 46:9–10).

Cyrus the Great was the Medo-Persian emperor who overthrew Babylon and gave the orders for the Israelites to return to their land (see Ezra 1:1–4). Accordingly, in 538 BC, forty-eight years after the fall of Jerusalem, Sheshbazzar received

1. This prophecy was fulfilled most clearly when the temple was rebuilt in 515 BC, seventy years after the exiled people arrived in Babylon. It was only then that the return was fully accomplished.

the temple articles from Cyrus and led the return of the first party to the ruins of Jerusalem. It was a moment of epochal significance and great drama.

Sheshbazzar, the son of Jehoiachin, the last legitimate king of Judah before and during the exile, would have been fairly aged by this time. We do not read a great deal about him in Scripture, except to learn that he succeeded in laying the foundation for a rebuilt temple on Mount Zion (Ezra 5:16).

The second chapter of Ezra, which along with Nehemiah is the main historical record of this period, tells us that the initial party returning to Jerusalem consisted of 42,360 Israelites. Although Cyrus had placed Sheshbazzar in command, it seems clear that from the start the acting leader was the younger and presumably more able Zerubbabel, the son of Sheshbazzar's older brother Shealtiel, along with Joshua the high priest. These two represented the kingly and priestly lines going back to David and Zadok his faithful priest.

One of this multitude was Zechariah, who must have been a young man or boy at the time of the return. He is named in verse 1 as son of Berechiah, and grandson of Iddo. In the record of Nehemiah 12, Zechariah is listed as the head of the house of Iddo, so many commentators reasonably suggest that Zechariah's father must have died young, leaving him as the principal heir of Iddo's house. His was a priestly family, something Zechariah held in common with both the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The New Testament provides one additional piece of biographical information having to do with Zechariah's death. In Matthew 23, as Jesus was speaking his woes upon the Pharisees and upon Jerusalem, he recounted the people's record of killing the prophets. "On you," he cried, "may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (v. 35). Liberal commentators consider this an error in the Bible, since 2 Chronicles 24:20–22 records a different Zechariah being slain in the temple courtyard, long before the time of our prophet. This assumes that there could not have been two different prophets of this name (and Zechariah is a fairly common name in Scripture) so that Jesus was therefore in error. Rather than presupposing Jesus' fallibility, we do better to accept his word and conclude that our Zechariah, the postexilic prophet, had his own life ended at the hands of the people in the very temple God used him so mightily to see to completion. As such he was the last

Return to Me

of the prophets slain in the Old Testament, a line started outside the gates of the Garden with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain.

There would be sixteen years between Israel's initial return with the laying of the temple's foundation in 536 BC and the beginning of Zechariah's ministry. His prophecy, we are told, begins "in the eighth month, in the second year of Darius" (1:1)—that is, in the year 520 BC. Darius was a general who assumed the Persian throne after a plot resulted in the apparent suicide of Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus, who had been away effecting his conquest of Egypt. By this time a dispirited restoration community in Jerusalem had become bogged down both spiritually and materially. One commentator explains:

If the returned exiles expected the dawn of Yahweh's universal reign, with Jews and Gentiles flocking to Jerusalem, their hopes soon faded. Jews did not leave the population centers of [Babylonia] in vast numbers, and interference from the longtime inhabitants of the land frustrated the building efforts, bringing the work on the temple to a halt.²

Two months before Zechariah's first vision from God, the prophet Haggai had broken the silence and called the people into action: "Go up to the hills," he cried, "and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD" (Hag. 1:8). While Haggai focused the people on building the temple for the Lord, God came to Zechariah and focused him on rebuilding the people and their faith.

RETURN TO ME!

The opening lines of Zechariah highlight a doctrinal theme that will be important throughout the book: repentance. Zechariah explains the situation: "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 1:2–3). We are reminded here of the Lord Jesus' teaching as he started his gospel ministry five hundred years after the prophet: "Repent," Jesus cried, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17).

2. Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 3:1004.

There are at least four points to be made about repentance from this passage. First is *the need for repentance*. This need is established by the fact that God judges all sin. The problem with the Israelites' forefathers was that they doubted God's judgment and therefore denied the need for their own repentance. Since they were God's chosen people, and since they possessed such divinely ordained institutions as the temple, they thought God would never punish them. This is why they ignored and often persecuted the prophets God sent to them. The fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity were God's telling response to their hardness of heart in refusing to repent. Zechariah's generation asked, "How do we start again, when our relationship with God is damaged by sin?" This is a question many people ask today. The answer is that we begin with repentance.

Zechariah pressed the need for repentance upon his own generation by recalling their nation's recent history. He warned, "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD" (Zech. 1:4). Then he asked leading questions designed to make his point: "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?" (Zech. 1:5). The answer was obvious as they stood amidst the ruins of the once magnificent city. Their fathers had gone into slavery and exile, and even the prophets were gone. Finally, Zechariah drove home the reality of God's prophetic Word: "But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?" (Zech. 1:6).

Though these events were in the past, the Word of the Lord had prevailed and come forward into the present. As Isaiah had said, "All flesh is grass. . . . The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa. 40:6–8). The one thing that could never fail was God's Word, and Zechariah was bringing it forward into this new generation. Zechariah's name means "the Lord remembers"; on the one hand God remembered his people, but on the other he remembered his words and decrees, which must always be reckoned with, then as now.

Verse 1 says, "The word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah." If any one message characterized the prophetic mission—any one "word of the LORD"—it was this call to repentance. Although the prophets of old were gone, God had raised up a new prophet to perform the same task and bring

the same message. The forefathers had realized this in exile, once it was too late, repenting and saying, “As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us” (Zech. 1:6). A clear expression of repentant prayer among at least some of the exiles is found in Daniel 9, where that prophet-in-exile expounded upon these very words. His and others’ willingness to repent left this later generation of their children without excuse if they did not follow suit.

If the first lesson is the need for repentance, the second is *a definition of repentance*. Repentance is both turning from sin and turning to God. God had said to the earlier generations, “Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds—” (Zech. 1:4), and that is no less a requirement now. Repentance is turning away from sin, both from the way of sin and the works of sin. Repentance is about both our actions and our attitude. We tend to think we have repented if we just curb our behavior a small bit, but repentance includes our hearts and desires, as Zechariah explained, “Return from your evil ways and your evil deeds.” Along with turning from sin, we are called to turn to God. Zechariah 1:3 puts this directly: “Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.”

These two are inseparable—turning from sin and turning to God. On the one hand we cannot turn to God except by turning from the sin he abhors; on the other hand until we come back to God, we simply lack the strength to overcome the sin that holds us in bondage. Only his light can cast out our darkness.

Zechariah’s words are especially striking in light of the particular audience to whom he was speaking. These were the people who had returned to the land. The majority of their fellow countrymen had remained comfortably ensconced in Babylonia, where the Jews had grown prosperous. Yet as Haggai’s prophecy made clear, the hearts of the returnees were not fully devoted to the Lord. They had walked back down the long road to God’s city, yet they had stopped short of God himself. Partly due to opposition from nearby enemies and partly due to their own indifference, the restoration community had lost interest in rebuilding God’s temple. T. V. Moore describes the situation before Zechariah:

He had witnessed the growth of that selfish greed for their own individual interests, and their neglect of the interests of religion, that was so mournful

a characteristic of this period. . . . Now, as the temple was to them the grand symbol of revealed religion, indifference to it was an undoubted symptom of backsliding and spiritual declension.³

“Return to me!” says the Lord, and that is a command we too must note. It is not enough for us merely to call ourselves Christians and to go to the places where the Lord is worshiped and served. We must actually worship and serve him from the heart. “Return to me,” God said to this people who had come so far to the city but had grown cold in their hearts toward him. “Return to me, and I will return to you.” That is always the rule of spiritual life and blessing.

This leads to the third point about repentance: *God graciously receives all who turn to him*. “I will return to you,” he promised. What a blessing those words must have been to these children of idolaters, sons of an adulterous generation whom God might well have repudiated altogether. Yet this is the grace that always characterizes the heart of our Savior God. Even before the exile he had given every chance for the people to repent, inviting their return to him in faith: “Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God” (Jer. 3:12–13).

This is our great incentive for repentance, that however great our sin and backsliding, God is ready to receive those who come to him in repentance and faith. This is the gospel according to Zechariah, the good news of great joy that God will gladly receive those who turn to him in repentance and faith.

Jesus taught this in the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal had taken his share of the father’s wealth, which he then squandered in sinful living, only to find himself in desperate straits. Despondent, but having come to his senses, he determined to go back to his father, begging for mercy. But Jesus said:

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called

3. T. V. Moore, *Haggai, Zechariah, & Malachi* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 118–19.

Return to Me

your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:20–24)

Such is our God; why would anyone refuse his loving heart?

This leaves a fourth and final point about repentance: *it is only through the blood of Jesus Christ that God forgives those who repent*. We noted that our approach to Zechariah will be christological, and here is where the opening verses point to Christ. God’s call to repentance was directly linked to the rebuilding of the temple. There is a reason for that, for it was at the temple that the blood sacrifices were offered that dealt with the problem of sin. God is a holy God; he must always judge sin. Therefore God could not accept these sinners unless atonement was made. In Zechariah’s day this required the blood of lambs at the very temple they were to rebuild, but ultimately it required the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus is the true Lamb of God, and his was the blood shed to take away our sin. Theologian J. I. Packer explains: “Between us sinners and the thunderclouds of divine wrath stands the cross of the Lord Jesus. If we are Christ’s through faith, then we are justified through His cross, and the wrath will never touch us, neither here nor hereafter. Jesus ‘delivers us from the wrath to come’ (1 Thess. 1:10).”⁴

When we repent, therefore, we must come through faith in Jesus Christ and in his blood, which turns God’s righteous anger into joyful acceptance and love. Because Jesus was slain upon the cross for us, God robes us in his righteousness and is glad to receive us with arms open wide in bounteous grace as we return in penitent faith.

AN URGENT APPEAL

Our approach to Zechariah will be historical, doctrinal, christological, and also practical. Therefore, we must apply these words to our own situation: “Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you” (Zech. 1:3).

4. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 141.

The earlier generation of Israelites thought God would not judge them for their sin; the ruins of their city bore eloquent testimony to their folly. Our generation is also piling up ruins out of folly, even within the church. “Do not be deceived,” Paul wrote: “God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8).

If you are a Christian, but backslidden into sin and spiritual decline, remember the history lesson Zechariah placed before his generation. Your sin will not bring blessing but ruin, however sweet its deceptive song in your ears. If you persist in sin you will at the least bring upon yourself God’s chastisement, and at the worst you will prove that you have really not believed at all, ultimately to reap the destruction you are now sowing with the seeds of sin. In fact, this invitation from God speaks grace to every Christian, every day—backslidden or not! In the ups and downs of our spiritual lives, how wonderful to see God’s open arms encouraging continual repentance and trust!

If you are not a Christian, these words are especially for you. If God hates sin enough to punish even his own people, what do you think will happen to you? If God allowed his chosen people Israel—the elect nation of his own love and purpose—to fall to the sword, to be dragged off in chains, and the city and its temple reduced to ruin—what, then, will be your fate if you continue to rebel, you who have no such claim upon his affection? The lesson is clear: You must repent at once, turn from your sin and to this God of grace who offers everyone salvation through the blood of the Savior Jesus Christ. If you will repent and turn to him in faith, your sins will be forgiven on the spot and you will enter into everlasting life.

“Return to me,” says our God, “and I will return to you.” “Come to me,” he offers, “return!” Those who do will find God ready to forgive through Jesus Christ, ready to restore, and ready to bless from out of the depths of his abounding grace. No matter who you have been or what you have gone through, by turning to God you will be able truly to start again, because God will return to you.