

Zech 12-13

The stricken shepherd  
*Tim Anderson 28/5/2023*

What's the end of the world going to be like?  
Secular pictures of the end of the world are always a disaster.  
When I was a kid,  
the picture was nuclear holocaust.  
It was a reasonable fear,  
given how close we came to nuclear war in the Cuban missile crisis.  
These days the picture of the end of the world  
is more about an environmental apocalypse.  
Global warming melts the polar icecaps  
and we all drown.  
That kind of thing.  
The scientists have a picture of the end of the world.  
The sun turns into a supernova and the earth gets swallowed up.  
It sounds impossible to do anything about,  
and impossible to survive.  
That would be a very final and fiery end.  
But they don't predict it to happen for a couple of billion years  
which is a long way off most of our time horizons.  
The Christian picture of the end of the world  
on the other hand is optimistic.  
At least for followers of Jesus.  
Jesus returns.  
His people meet him.  
And spend an eternity joyful in his loving presence.  
Everything that is wrong with the world is undone  
and a perfected creation is remade.  
I'm a fan of the Christian view of the end of the world.

Zechariah gives us his picture of the end of the world in chapters 12-14.  
We are looking at 12 and 13 today.  
You might find Zechariah's picture of the end of the world

looks a bit like the world that he lived in.

But that's how we do pictures of heaven.

We can't see it.

So we compare it to what we do see and know.

And whilst Zechariah's pictures are a bit unfamiliar to us,

some of them bear an uncanny resemblance to the Lord Jesus.

These are some of the passages that point most clearly to the Lord Jesus in the whole of the Old Testament.

So let's look at Zechariah's picture of the end.

12:1-9 describes the nations with their armies against Judah.

And God strengthens Judah so the nations are not able to prevail.

How does this point forward to our view of the end?

It seems quite a stretch to imagine the armies of the world arrayed against an army of Christians of something.

In fact whenever politicians have described their armies as God's army doing God's work,

they never seems to end up doing something that

Christians would be happy claiming as our own.

But interestingly,

the NT writers do see this picture being fulfilled in Jesus.

In Acts 4,

Peter and John have been commanded not speak in the name of Jesus.

And they see their situation as a fulfilment of Psalm 2,

which is very similar to Zech 12.

"Why do the nations rage

and the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up

and the rulers band together against the Lord

and against his anointed one."

When the church is told not to proclaim Jesus by the secular authorities,

that's a fulfilment of the armies of the earth

arrayed against the people of God.

And God will strengthen us.

12:5 "The people of Jerusalem are strong because the Lord Almighty is their God."

But if God is going to win a great victory, how is he going to do it?

The answer is a paradox that must have seemed baffling to the people of Zechariah's day.

13:7 "Awake sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!"

declares the Lord Almighty.

We know from previous weeks

that the shepherds were the leaders of Israel.

There were good shepherds and bad shepherds.

This is the good shepherd.

This is the shepherd the Lord Almighty calls 'my shepherd'.

And yet he is going to be struck down with the sword.

The victory of God's people

is going to come through the death of God's chosen shepherd.

How could that possibly happen?

I can't imagine Zechariah's first hearers had any idea

how this could possibly take place.

As Christians, we read this and we see Jesus.

It screams out of the page to us.

And not just to us.

The Lord Jesus himself said that this passage was about him.

In Mk 14:27, in the Garden of Gethsemane,

Jesus tells his disciples that when he is arrested they will all desert him.

"You will all fall away," Jesus told them,

"for it is written:

"I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.'"

Jesus sees the fulfilment of prophecy is the disciples falling away.

The sheep are scattered.

But that makes him the shepherd who is struck down by God.

How could the death of the good shepherd of God lead to a great victory?

Even the answer to that question is in Zechariah.

12:10 "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.

They will look upon me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child."

The spirit of grace and supplication means that God's people are asking for the forgiveness of their sins. What sin have they committed?

They have pierced the shepherd.

And their hearts mourn at this terrible crime they have committed.

And they turn to God in fervent supplication.

Please forgive us!

Humble and genuine repentance.

And so it is that on the day of Pentecost,

Peter addressed the crowd.

Acts 2:36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this:

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

You pierced him!

And how did the crowd react to Peter's accusation?

"When the people heard this,

they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the others apostles,

"Brothers, what shall we do?"

The way that the death of good shepherd brings victory for God's people is by leading them to repentance.

Only when we recognise the magnitude of our crime can our hearts properly humble themselves before God.

The victory comes through the death of the good shepherd because that's how God's people are purified.

That too is in Zechariah.

13:1 "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from their sin and impurity."

The repentance of God's people results in a washing away of our sins.

Of course

that's exactly what the death of the Lord Jesus achieved for us.

The language is picked up in the great hymn Rock of Ages.

"Foul I to the fountain fly,  
wash me Saviour or I die."

The word fountain doesn't occur in the NT.

Augustus Toplady, who wrote Rock of Ages,

must have picked up the image from here.

But if there's no fountain in the NT,

there is washing to cleanse us from sin.

In Rev 7, the angel is describing the people of God and he says,

7:14 "These are those who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb."

You might not be able to wash in a fountain,  
but you can wash in the blood of the lamb.

When Jesus died on the cross,

did forgiveness come to all of the people?

No it didn't.

The free offer of forgiveness was held out.

But forgiveness only came

to those who looked on the one they had pierced and mourned for him.

Unless people repent they cannot be forgiven.

Of the Jews who were alive in Jesus day,

3000 became believers on the day of Pentecost.

That's a lot.

And many more thousands became believers

in the days and years that followed.

But many did not.

Many saw the stricken shepherd as weakness.  
They looked for a Messiah who would be a conqueror.  
And as the apostles travelled around the Roman Empire  
in the decades following Jesus resurrection,  
it was a similar story.  
Paul planted churches in the cities that he visited.  
But they were small gatherings.  
Hardly noticeable amidst the bustle of city life.  
And it's a similar story today.  
Someone expressed surprise to me this week  
that a needy person in our community had not heard of Trinity Tucker.  
It's not a surprise.  
We might think that everyone knows what we are doing.  
The reality is that we are a barely noticeable blip  
on the communal life of our town.  
Unless you happen to move in Christian circles,  
and then you would hear about us.

Life in the kingdom of God prior to Jesus' return  
is life as a minority  
in a world that if you are lucky will ignore you.

And yet these small communities over history  
have had an outsized affect of the world around us.  
We brought schools, hospitals and universities into Western civilisation.  
We campaigned for and achieved the abolition of slavery.  
We moved illiterate populations to literacy.  
We treated indigenous Australians with respect and care  
when other white settlers were massacring them.

Our existence in the world is a minority existence.  
And yet this is not because God's plan has failed.  
God wants us to live a minority existence  
because the struggle to serve him in difficult circumstances  
is what grows our character.

It's what fashions us into the people that Jesus would have us be.

It was never God's plan  
 that there would be a triumph of world evangelisation,  
 and then when every last person had been converted,  
 then Jesus would return to a world  
 where he was universally loved and welcomed.  
 Whatever the church growth gurus tell you,  
 that was not God's plan and was never going to happen.

God's plan is purify a faithful remnant.  
 And the purification process is often painful.  
 You can't grow in patience  
 unless you have something to be patient with.  
 You can't grow in joy  
 unless there are things that tempt you to despair.  
 You can't grow in kindness unless there are irritating people.  
 It's easy to be kind to the appreciative and grateful.

And Zechariah tells us about that aspect of life  
 as we wait for our Lord to return as well.  
 13:8-9 "In the whole land," declares the Lord,  
 "two thirds will be struck down and perish;  
 yet one third will live in it.  
 This third I will put into the fire;  
 I will refine them like silver  
 and test them like gold.  
 They will call on my name  
 and I will answer them;  
 I will say, "They are my people,"  
 and they will say, "The Lord is our God."

It's a very sad thing when people give up their faith  
 when difficulties come along.  
 It doesn't happen in poor countries.

They expect difficulties.  
But there is a sense of entitlement from some in the wealthy west  
that this shouldn't happen to me.  
And if it does, then something has gone wrong with Christianity.  
No. Zechariah told you 2500 years ago,  
that there would be a refining fire.  
When difficulties come,  
that's God refining us.

What can we say in overall summary  
about Zechariah's picture of the end of the world.

First of all,  
it doesn't seem to be so much about the end of the world.  
It's mostly about the coming of Jesus,  
him dying for us.  
Forgiveness of sins being provided through his death.  
And the refining that is a normal part of the Christian life.  
How is that the end of the world?  
Well for Zechariah and all the OT prophets,  
there wasn't a distinction  
between the coming of the messiah and the end of the world.  
Next week we will look at a chapter 14.  
It is focused on what we would call the end.  
But for the prophets these things were all distant future.  
It's often described a bit like a mountain range.  
When you are at a distance,  
like the OT prophets,  
the mountains all seem together.  
It's only when you get closer  
that you see that some are much closer than others.

Secondly,  
Zechariah's picture of the end is startlingly specific about Jesus.  
It makes me sad that we aren't more familiar with these chapters.  
The gospel writers appropriate these chapters



around the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

"They will look upon me, the one they have pierced."

John takes these words

as a fulfilment of the soldiers spearing Jesus in the side,  
when they are checking that he has died on the cross.

But John isn't just saying,

"There's a random prediction that Jesus will be speared in the side."

He's saying that we should go back and understand Zechariah,  
and understand what it says about the one who is pierced.

That way we will understand the Lord Jesus and what he came for.

"Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered."

I already mentioned

that Jesus saw his desertion by the disciples fulfilled in these words.

When the NT quotes the OT, we should always go back  
and try to understand the passages in their fullness.

The NT authors usually are reflecting on the meaning  
of the whole passages and not just the words they quote.

Thirdly,

I want us to be encouraged when we are being refined.

Encouraged not discouraged.

The refiners fire purifies us.

And at the end of the process God will say of us,

"These are my people."

And we will say,

"The Lord is our God."

Let's say it.

"The Lord is our God."