

Zech 1:7-21

The great reversal

Tim Anderson 19/2/2023

Josh Harry is currently living between promise and fulfilment.
He wants to learn to play the keyboard.
Joyce has bought him a keyboard.
He saw it is the cupboard.
He knows it's coming.
But he has to wait for his birthday before he gets it.
The keyboard has been promised.
The promise is solid.
This is not Mum just saying something and then forgetting about it.
The keyboard is there in the present cupboard
and Josh knows it.
But he has to wait till his birthday.
It's not easy living between promise and fulfilment.
You would like to bring the promise into the present.
"Oh Mum, why can't I have the keyboard now?"
What parent hasn't heard those plaintiff cries
and said, "Sorry son, you've got to wait."?

The Jews in Zechariah's day
were living between promise and fulfilment.
Last week we read the promise of God.
1:3 "Return to me," declares the Lord Almighty,
"and I will return to you."
God returning to the Jews was a promise with a very concrete meaning.
God would take up dwelling in his temple again.
Once again, God would act for Israel and against her enemies.
Remember the stories of those marvellous victories of David
against the Philistines?
If the stories are a bit hazy for you,
trust me, the Jews knew them well.
And this is how things are when God is with you.

And when God is with you,
instead of times of privation,
there would be times of plenty.

In OT times,

physical blessing were very much part of the covenant promises.

Today we would want to give prosperity theology a wide berth.

But not so in the OT.

Faithfulness to God's covenant

came with some very clear this worldly benefits.

The Jews had repented.

We read that last week.

1:6 "Then they repented and said,

'The Lord Almighty has done to us

what our ways and practices deserve,

just as he determined to do.'

The promise is there.

If they repent,

God will be with them.

They have repented.

Now when are God's blessings going to start to flow?

Well it's three months after the oracle we read last week.

And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah again.

And basically it's a message to tell the Jews to hang in there.

You might not have seen God fulfil all his promises yet.

But he is going to do it.

So let's dive in to Zechariah's second oracle.

So Zechariah has a vision.

There's a bloke on a red horse.

We find out in verse 11 that this bloke is actually an angel.

And he has a whole lot of horses with him.

You can think of him something like
an angelic Man from Snowy River.

And as happens in most of Zechariah's visions,
there is another angel who is interpreting the vision to him.
Which is helpful, because it's pretty hard to know what a vision means
unless someone interprets it for you.

And it's good if the interpreter is an angel sent from God
because then you know the interpretation is correct.

The angels explain things to Zechariah.

The horses are actually there to scout things out.

You might think of them a bit like the drones
that the soldiers in the Ukraine send up.

You want to find out what the other guys are doing,
you send up a drone with a camera,
and you can find out what's going on.

Drones hadn't been invented yet,
so the angel sent out a herd of horses.

And these are special horses,
like many animals in your dreams,
these ones can speak.

And what did they say?

1:11 "We have gone throughout the whole earth
and found the whole world at rest and in peace."

And you think to yourself,
"How nice!

I wish some horses could go around our world today
and find it at rest and in peace.

The poor old folks in Turkey, Syria and New Zealand
could do with some rest,
and the folks in the Ukraine could do with some peace. "

But we wouldn't be understanding
how the Jewish returnees from exile were thinking about things.

They had been treated dreadfully
first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians.

These were their enemies.

If the Lord Almighty was going to 'return to them'
then they wanted to see some evidence of it in a reversal of fortunes.

They wanted to experience some peace and rest.
They wanted their oppressors to experience some tough times.
The angel in the vision hears about the peace and rest that the
oppressors of God's people were experiencing,
and he cries out to God,

1:12 "Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy
from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah,
which you have been angry with these 70 years."

The horses see peace on earth.

The angel interprets that as God withholding mercy from his people.

It's hard for us to countenance such an extreme

"if you are not punishing them, you are not showing mercy to us,"
type of outlook.

But that was the reality.

If you read through Nehemiah,

you'll see that God's people in the land

experienced ongoing hostility from their enemies after they returned.

Their only way to get some peace and rest

was to rebuild the walls to Jerusalem so they could defend themselves.

And that didn't happen for decades after this prophecy.

Well God's response is not to fix the problem instantly.

My experience is that is infrequently God's response.

Normally he is more into giving us the grace

to persevere in the midst of problems

than removing our problems instantly.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us why.

Heb 12:7 "Endure hardship as discipline:

God is treating you as his children."

The people who you know

who have had their characters most shaped

into the likeness of the Lord Jesus

have most likely endured significant hardship.

Although God doesn't take away the problem instantly,

there is a promise that judgement will come upon the nations that opposed God's people. The four craftsmen at the end of the vision are bringing destruction on the nations that opposed God's people. Zechariah wouldn't want to hold his breath waiting. It would be a significant time, like a century, before the Greeks would throw down the Persian Empire. And the same is true today. The Kim Dynasty in North Korea that violently opposes God's people is on to its third generation. But we can take comfort in the knowledge that God has the craftsman ready, and in his time, he will throw them down.

God might not take the problems away instantly. But he does speak some reassuring words. God might not take our problems away instantly. But neither will he tell us to 'suck it up princess'. He knows that real adversity is a real challenge. And we need real encouragement to be able to persevere through it.

There are three messages of comfort for God's people. 1:14-15 "This is what the Lord Almighty says: I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little bit angry, but they went too far with the punishment." It was by God's decree that Babylon punished his people. But God didn't require them to commit all the atrocities that they did. The punishment that they dished out to the Jews was not reflecting just God's decree. It was also reflecting the cruelty of their hearts. Now The Lord Almighty is not promising that they will get their comeuppance straight away.

But he is telling the Jews that he has noticed.
The situation didn't escape his attention.
And the implication is that in the fullness of time,
he will take action.

Do you ever feel like your situation doesn't get noticed?
Some injustices can niggle at you for years.
I was filling out an ALRC survey this week.
They have put forward a proposal to government
that Christian Schools should not be able to 'discriminate'
by preferentially hiring Christian teachers.
And I wonder to myself,
why is it, that we have to justify ourselves in the community?
Christian Schools are a massive force for good in the community.
And the Community as a whole must agree.
How do I know?
Because they send their kids there.
If they didn't think Christians did a good job of running schools,
they wouldn't send their kids to them.
There is a free alternative down the road.
And I haven't seen the humanists society or the atheists collective
starting up any schools recently.
And it's interesting with these proposals,
the ALRC is not suggesting that the Labor Party
should have to employ people who aren't Labor Party members.
The ALRC is not suggesting that the RSL
should have to have someone who is not a returned serviceman
as its president.
It's only religious schools that are in the firing line.
We know why that is.
Well that's one of my pet peeves.
I'm not sure what yours are.
But I know that the Lord Almighty has noticed.
Just because he hasn't done anything about it yet
should not be confused with inattention.

God is watching the injustices that are done to his people.
And he will set the record straight when he chooses to.

I think that ought to be an encouragement to us.
If I know that God is watching intently,
then I don't need to get myself wound up if I'm mistreated.
God has got it.
Not saying I'm perfect at that.
But I'm far better than I would be if I didn't know that God is watching.

The second message of comfort.
1:16 "Therefore this is what the Lord says:
I will return to Jerusalem with mercy,
and there my house will be rebuilt.
And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem,"
declares the Lord Almighty.
This oracle was spoken three months
after the verses we looked at last week.
Something significant had happened in the intervening 3 months.
The foundation stone for the new temple had been laid.
It would be a few years before temple construction would be finished.
But they had at least laid a foundation stone.
You can read about it in Haggai 2.
The message is that the Jews can know that God is with them
because he is moving in.
And that after a 70 year absence.
Now again, there's a gap between promise and fulfilment.
He can't move in until the temple is finished being rebuilt.
And that's a few years off.
But the laying of the foundation stone
is at least something tangible to say that it is going to happen.

For us, there is a gap between promise and fulfilment as well.
We have the presence of the Lord Jesus with us now
through his Holy Spirit.

That's something tangible.

But it's not everything we are looking forward to.

We look forward to seeing God face to face.

Paul puts it this way in Rom 8.

Rom 8:23 "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies."

Having the Holy Spirit living in you is no vaccine against groaning inwardly.

Like the Jews of Zechariah's day who looked at the foundation stone and dreamed of something better,

we dream of our future with new bodies

in the new heavens and the new earth.

But that's an encouragement.

That future is coming.

And it can't be taken away from God's faithful children.

So hang in there.

There is a third encouragement.

1:17 "Proclaim further: This is what the Lord Almighty says: my towns will again overflow with prosperity,

and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem."

Some elements of that promise we've spoken about already, but the overflowing prosperity is new.

We know that those who returned from exile had a lean time.

Haggai tells us they experienced crop failure.

Nehemiah tells us that enemies tried to destroy crops and make life difficult.

They didn't want God's people re-established in the land.

But God promises restored prosperity.

Again there's a gap between promise and fulfilment.

Vineyards take years to re-establish and reach full production.

Olive groves take even longer.

It takes generations for hard working farmers to build prosperity.

But the promise is there that this is what God has in mind for the Jews.

And realistically it's going to be hard to put your shoulder to the plough to do all that hard work,
unless you believe that God will give you some fruit for your labour.

What does that mean for Christians?

I think the primary sort of prosperity we look for is gospel prosperity.

The Lord Jesus told us,

Mt 9:37-38 "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore,
to send out workers into his harvest field."

It can be hard to put your shoulder to the gospel plough,
if you don't think you will get any return on your labour.

But we have some promises that we can rely on.

God promises that his word will not return to him empty.

The apostle Paul was given this message in a dream

when he was in Corinth,

Acts 18:9-10 "Do not be afraid;

keep on speaking,

do not be silent.

For I am with you,

and no one is going to attack and harm you,

because I have many people in this city."

Paul was promised that God is with him,

and that there would be some gospel prosperity for his labour.

Of course, you and I are not the apostle Paul,

and promises made to him can't be appropriated thoughtlessly.

He was not made that promise when he was run out of Thessalonica.

But nevertheless, God is with us

and he will work through the preaching of the gospel.

It is the power that brings salvation to all who believe.

So I think we have here three great encouragements.

1. God does notice our situation and he won't ignore it.

Ask him to take away your angst about whatever peeves you.

2. We can look forward to our future in the new creation.
While there's a gap between promise and fulfilment,
the fulfilment is coming,
and we take present comfort from our promised future.
Josh, it's OK to dream about the contents of the present cupboard.

3. There will be gospel prosperity
as a result of our labour for the kingdom.
Your labour in the Lord is not in vain.