

Zech 5:1-6:8

The removal of sin

Tim Anderson 26/3/2023

What's the most powerful thing?

The power of a nuclear explosion is pretty hard to top.

Particularly when you look at the size of the bomb that makes the blast.

They are not that big.

But then if you do a bit of physics,

you realise that our sun is the equivalent

of 10 billion nuclear bombs going off each second.

So the sun must by definition be more powerful than a nuclear bomb.

And our sun is not even a large star.

Now someone who knew a bit about physics

was a chap called Albert Einstein.

Einstein was asked what the most powerful force in the universe was.

Do you know what Einstein said?

Compound interest.

Imagine you put \$1 in the bank in the year Jesus rose from the dead.

And the bank gave you 2% interest per year.

How much money would you have now?

The answer is more than 100 000 trillion dollars.

That makes compound interest a very powerful force indeed.

But I guess as you have already worked out,

there is a problem with that thought experiment.

As well as have 100 000 trillion dollars,

you would have died more than 20 times.

That's a definite limit on the power of compound interest

for any human being.

So what actually is the most powerful thing?

I want to say that the Word of God is the most powerful.

Consider this,

it was by his word that God created the universe.

Every single star that pumps out 100 billion nuclear bombs each second.

God's word brought them all into being.
Gen 1:14 "And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky."
That's God's Word
bringing the stars and the sun and the moon into being.
God spoke and it happened.

And you know the creation story.
It was all good.
And then sin entered the world
and with sin came death.
The thing that reduces the power of compound interest is a result of sin.
And God's word has the power to deal with sin.
God's word is more powerful than sin.
That is what we are going to see in Zechariah 5.

God's word is the most powerful thing.

Zechariah looked.
That means we are at the start of another vision.
And he sees a flying scroll.
You might think about a flying book.
They read things on scrolls.
We read things in books.
And this flying scroll was 10 metres by 5 metres.
That is many times larger than any scroll that has ever been made.
Larger than any book either.
Point is this is a scroll with God's Word written on it.
And God's word is powerful.
Very powerful.
And so you need an impossibly large scroll to write it on.
And this scroll is a flying scroll.
You don't need me to tell you that's impossible too.
But anything can happen in a vision.
If you can have a scroll ten metres by five metres,
then why shouldn't it fly?

The point of the flying scroll
is that God's word gets to where it's going.
God's word is not restricted to staying on scroll.
In every situation where God wants his word to be active,
then it will get there.
This is not about God's word being heard.
Like as if the scroll is flying to every corner of the land
so every person can hear what it says.
These words from God are decrees.
And they go to every corner of the land to take action
in the places that God wants them to.
It's like God's word in creation.
God didn't say, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky,"
so that someone could hear him.
He said it because when he speaks things happen.
He spoke to create.
"Let there be lights."
Stars appear.
Here he speaks to judge.
Not so that the person who has done the wrong thing
will hear him and be rebuked.
He speaks to enact his judgement.
The punishment for your crimes is this.
And then it happens.

What are the crimes that the flying scroll is there to punish?
5:3 tells us that the scroll has two sides.
On one side is written,
"Every thief will be banished."
On the other,
"Everyone who swears falsely will be banished."
So the flying scroll is going to fly to the houses
of all the thieves in the land
and all those who swore false oaths.
And their houses are going to be flattened.

That's a powerful scroll!
Of course this is a vision and it's symbolic.
But none the less, the is God vowing punishment on thieves and liars.

Now you might wonder,
"Why are thieves and liars singled out?"
There could be murderers and adulterers in the land too.
There are a couple of possibilities.
The first is that thieves and liars are representatives in the vision
of all who break God's commandments.
And as such the vision is promising judgement
on all who break God's commands.
That's possible.
The second possibility is that there was a particular problem
with thieving and perjury in Zechariah's community.
Remember that Zechariah's countrymen
had recently returned from exile.
It's quite likely that there were some legal disputes
about who got to keep which bit of the promised land.
There could well have been claim and counter claim
about whose grandparents owned which patch of land
before the Babylonian invasion,
which now ought rightly to belong to them.
You can imagine that in the Ukrainians were successful
at expelling the Russians from their land,
there could easily be young people
return to properties they had fled from,
their parents killed in the fighting.
How do you prove that this is your family land?
It's quite possible that there were some false oaths being sworn
to steal land that belongs to other families.
And God is promising that if you build a house
on land that you have stolen,
he will raze that house to the ground.

Zechariah has another vision.

There's a basket

which the angel helpfully tells us is the iniquity of the people.

This basket has a lead cover

and when the cover is opened there is a woman inside.

The woman is labelled as wickedness by the angel

and stuffed back into the basket and securely contained.

Well it wouldn't surprise me if some of the ladies present were feeling a bit uncomfortable with the imagery of this vision.

Why does wickedness have to be personified as a woman?

Why can't it be a bloke in the basket?

Well the reason seems to be

that the chief source of idolatry in the nation

was worship of the goddess Asherah.

And in Hebrew, Asherah, sounds very much like the word wickedness.

And because Asherah was a goddess, she is being pictured as a woman.

Hopefully

that makes the ladies feel a bit more comfortable with this vision.

What is the vision actually trying to communicate?

The basket is a false ark of the covenant.

It has a lead cover because lead is the least valuable metal.

The actual ark of the covenant had a gold cover.

This false ark of the covenant is being borne by two false cherubs.

The real ark of the covenant had cherubs on the corners, bearers of God's throne.

This false ark was being borne by women crossed with storks, presumably because storks were unclean animals

and you would have unclean false cherubs to bear a false ark.

Where is the false ark going?

It's going to Babylon, the home of everything that is wicked.

And in Babylon, there is a false temple

being built for the false ark carried by false cherubs.

So in summary,

what is going on here?

God is banishing wickedness from the land.
He's taking wickedness out of the home of his people
and he's putting it in the place where wickedness belongs.

Now we want to draw a distinction here.
Back in chapter 3, Zechariah had a vision of the high priest Joshua
being cleansed and commissioned
for his role of purifying the nation from sin.
You could say that is sin being dealt with.
Here we have a vision of the flying scroll
meting out God's judgement
and the false ark of the covenant,
the ark of wickedness if you like,
being banished to Babylon.
You could say that sin is being dealt with.
But sin is being dealt with in a different way.
In chapter 3, the consequences of sin are being dealt with
by a means of forgiveness being provided.
In chapter 5, sin is being actually abolished.
God is getting rid of it.

We need to keep in mind that God's final goal for sin is not to forgive it.
Jesus' death on the cross provides the forgiveness of our sin.
But Jesus' death on the cross is not the last thing that happens.
Jesus is coming back.
And when Jesus comes back,
sin will be abolished.
God will actually get rid of it.
He won't need to forgive people's sins anymore
because there won't be any sins to forgive.

The first vision in chapter 6
gives us a bit of a flavour of God's final goal for sin.
There are chariots coming from bronze mountains.
Bronze is the metal of warfare.

And chariots are vehicles of warfare.
Think M1 Abrams tanks.
And the chariots are pulled by powerful horses.
What's the most powerful thing?
Well it might be a horse drawn chariot
if the chariot is a picture of the spirit of God.
These horses are not prancing ponies.
They are war horses.
And they are like Rottweilers on a leash.
They are straining to attack and destroy the enemies of their master.

What happens?

6:8 "Then the angel called to Zechariah,
'Look, those going towards the north country
have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.'"
The North country is Babylon.
It's not actually north of Israel,
but you travel north from Israel to get there,
because you don't want to walk straight across the desert.
So you go up and around.
We saw in the previous vision
that wickedness was boxed up in its false ark,
and put in a false temple in Babylon.
But it's not going to stay there.
The destroying horses went out.
And they gave the Spirit of the Lord rest.
What does that mean?
It means that God was no longer grieved because of idolatry.
Once again he could look out on his world
and feel at peace.
Asherah in her basket was destroyed.

What does this vision mean for Christians?
Whereas the clothing of Joshua the high priest
looked forward to Jesus' death for our sins,

the destruction of idolatry looks forward to his coming in glory.

I think there is a now component to it.

The flying scroll that went out to deliver God's punishment on those who were stealing and lying, is a sign of God rooting out sin now.

God is actually not content just to forgive our sin.

He wants to put it to death.

He wants to kill it.

Paul tells the Colossians,

Col 3:5 "Put to death, therefore, your old selves."

And how does God put to death our sinful natures?

Well the flying scroll is a clue.

His word is the most powerful thing.

What is more powerful than a nuclear bomb?

Well something that can change my sinful heart and make me want to live a life purity and holiness.

That is more powerful than a nuclear bomb.

Heb 4:12 tells us,

"For the word of God is alive and active.

Sharper than any double edged sword,

it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow,

it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

God's word is powerful to change people.

The apostle Paul himself was a murderer and persecutor of Christians.

God changed him into the very thing he had once so despised.

And there are many famous stories of other people

who have had their lives turned on their heads by the power of God.

Hardened criminals converted in jail.

Intellectuals like Lee Strobel

who thought he would write a book disproving Christianity,

was converted as he researched his book,

and became a defender of the faith.

Guards of Christians imprisoned for their faith

who were converted
 because they would see God's reflection in their captives.
 The book 'Forgive me Natasha' is just one story like that.
 The word of God is powerful to change people.

That's the flying scroll.
 But the false ark in the false temple that gets destroyed.
 Well that is a picture of God finally removing all sin.
 That's what happens when Jesus returns.
 It's just as much a future hope for us
 as it was a future hope for Zechariah and his contemporaries.
 What do we do with that hope?

I think it means we don't have to be driven to despair
 about the sin in the world.
 Different things get to different ones of us.
 I know of people in our church who are very frustrated
 at the way the rich and powerful seem to get away with it.
 Fair enough, it is appalling.
 Other people in our church have their hearts break
 because of the wanton lack of care for creation
 that we are part of and can't seem to break free from or change.
 Fair enough, we seem powerless.
 Others grieve for 100 000 lives of babies
 that are lost because of abortion in Australia each year.
 Fair enough, it's like the road toll with a couple of zeros on the end.
 And you can list a pile of other issues that could drive us to despair.
 children trafficked for prostitution or pornography,
 the flow of life destroying drugs into the community,
 the creep of false doctrine into the church.
 I'm going to stop the list now.
 It will depress us when we ought to be encouraged.
 Wickedness is going to get locked in a box and destroyed.
 Whatever grieves you,
 it grieves God more,

and unlike you,
he has a plan to deal with it.
Wickedness is running on borrowed time.
We might feel powerless.
But God is not.
He has the weapon more powerful than compound interest.
He speaks his word and wickedness is destroyed.

Let's praise the God of justice
who will make everything new.
Let's pray that his powerful word would change our lives.
And let's look forward to the time when he remakes the world.