

Scripture: Zechariah 1:7-17

Title: “Gracious and Comforting Words: God’s Interactions with the Nations”

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Introduction: The Old Testament lays the foundation for what God is doing in the world. It reveals how God created the heavens, the earth, and everything in them. He commanded the first man and woman to multiply throughout the earth, that it might be filled with God’s image, knowledge, and glory. But they rebelled, and in their fallen state God exiled them from the paradise in which he had placed them, causing them to be wanderers in the land.

God did not abandon humanity, but chose a new Adam, Abraham, and promised that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Abraham’s offspring were redeemed from slavery in Egypt and brought into a new paradise, where they lived for centuries under God’s prophets, priests, kings. Yet even in this land, the people rejected God’s words and thus were exiled again, this time as captives in the land of Babylon. Once again, God took the initiative to speak his words to his people through prophets. Even in persecution, God had compassion on those who are his.

Through the OT prophets, God communicated his word both through direct messages (such as in Zech 1:1-6) and through visions (such as in Zech 1:7 – 6:8). The NT apostles also employed various strategies for making God known. Paul indicated that he was flexible in his methods but faithful in his message as he shared the gospel with different demographics of people (1 Cor 9:19-23). This example is also true of the OT prophets. We would do well to learn from them.

There are eight visions in the first six chapters of Zechariah, but our focus is only on the first one (which probably corresponds structurally and thematically to the last one in 6:1-8). These visions point forward to God’s purpose of revealing his mercy to all the nations of the earth. At the time of Zechariah’s writings, God had already shown his mercy to his chosen people in Judah by allowing them to return to Jerusalem from their seventy-year Babylonian captivity. Now, as they are awaiting an even greater redemption, Zechariah previews what they can expect as God’s eternal plans are fulfilled.

1. The Lord’s authority in all the earth (vv. 7-11)

Zechariah saw in his vision a man riding on a red horse with three other horses behind him (v. 8). He wants to know, “What are these?” (v. 9). The answer from the rider of the red horse is that they are sent by the Lord to patrol the earth (vv. 10-11).

What do patrollers do? They have authority to observe what is happening. These patrollers have a God-given authority. Their authority is a representation of his authority. It’s like the messenger is showing Zechariah, “Whatever happens, know that the Lord is the one in charge. He is the sovereign one. He is in control.” This knowledge would comfort Zechariah as he saw the rest of the visions unfold, and it should comfort us as we live out these realities in the world.

2. The Lord’s mercy toward his persecuted people (vv. 12-13)

The messenger now has a question for the Lord: “How long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?” (v. 12). Other OT saints had also wondered “how long” certain struggles would continue (see Psalms 13:1-2; 74:9-10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; Hab 1:2; 2:6). The exile into Babylon was a type of persecution for the subjects of God’s kingdom. And even though they had been allowed to return to their homeland, many of God’s promises concerning their future had not yet been fulfilled. So, they were wondering how long God would allow these struggles to continue.

NT saints are not strangers to persecution. Consider Luke’s account of Paul and other disciples as they planted churches and appointed leaders in previously unreached cities.

*“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:21-22)*

Or consider what Paul said to Timothy, a pastor he was discipling: “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). As John Bunyan’s “Pilgrim” learned, all roads to the Celestial City are paved with trials and opposition.

Interestingly, the response to the question of how long is not specific, but it is reassuring. “The LORD answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me” (Zech 1:13). The Lord was about to display his mercy and grace and kindness once again toward his people. He would pour out his goodness on them in their land just as he had done previously. The words of the Lord are gracious and comforting, even when his mercy seems far off. His words are this way because he is this way (see Exod 34:6-7).

### 3. The Lord’s jealousy contrasted with his anger (vv. 14-17)

The Lord makes a distinction between his people and those who are not his people. Verse 14 expresses the Lord’s jealousy for his own, and verse 15 expresses the Lord’s anger against the nations who are at ease. God is jealous for his people because he loves them. He is angry with those who oppose him. Humanity’s greatest problem is not persecution or sufferings or tribulations in this life. Our greatest problem is that we are under God’s righteous wrath because of our sinful rebellion against him. We need to be saved from God’s wrath, by God’s grace, and for God’s glory, which can only happen through the person of Jesus, who lived and died and rose again on our behalf so that we can be reconciled to God.

God’s desire for Jerusalem is expressed in verses 16-17. The Lord says, “I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it” (v. 16). The mention of God’s house indicates that God intends to dwell with his people. He also adds that “the measuring line shall be stretched over Jerusalem” (v. 16). A measuring line was a way to speak of separating those who would be set aside for judgment from those who are set aside for mercy.

Lest we think that God’s mercy is only for Jerusalem and not for other nations, notice these promises from later in Zechariah.

*“And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you.”*  
(Zechariah 2:11)

*“Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”*  
(Zechariah 8:23)

Clearly the Lord’s mercy is not only for the Jews, but for those in all the nations who swear allegiance to the God of the Jews, who is also the Lord of all the earth. The future for Jerusalem and all who dwell in it from the nations is previewed in verse 17, where the Lord promises, “My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.” Whom the Lord chooses, he does not cast out. Our security as the people of God is in God’s choice of us.

Conclusion: This vision of Zechariah points forward to the vision that John saw in Revelation 6:1-11. It’s as though John is interpreting Zechariah through what he relays. Notice the patterns: a vision is given, the word of the Lord is relayed through messengers, horses are sent as symbols of coming judgment, the saints ask how long until the judgment is over, and comforting words are given to them.

The Lord has all authority. Those he judges will not escape. Those he saves he keeps in his mercy.