

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A look at Zechariah: Zechariah 13:1-9 - "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd"

Some years ago, a national newspaper printed a close up picture each day of an everyday object taken from an unusual angle. The game was to recognise the article. Sounds easy: but when the picture showed just part of the object and the object was viewed from underneath, it could be very difficult! However, as soon as you looked at the full picture, published on a later page, it seemed totally obvious, and you wondered how you could not have seen it straight away! Sometimes the Old Testament prophecies can be a bit like those close up images. You are seeing a small part of the overall picture and it is not always obvious where this one element fits in. The prophetic books are sometimes structured more by theme than by a straightforward timeline, and this means that the subject matter of a single chapter might refer to several distinct time periods, and not always in the order they appear!

One of the most helpful ways of determining what a particular passage refers to, is when that passage is quoted in the New Testament and applied there to a specific occurrence. Although Zechariah can be a difficult book to understand at times, several references to it are made in the New Testament, including one in our chapter for today, Zechariah 13.

### A Chapter Breakdown

Let's begin by breaking down Zechariah 13 into sections, and then take each section in turn.

- Zechariah 13:1 - A cleansing fountain
- Zechariah 13:2a - No more idols
- Zechariah 13:2b-6 - No more false prophets
- Zechariah 13:7a - Christ's death
- Zechariah 13:7b-9a - Judgement and refining
- Zechariah 13:9b - Restoration to God

### A cleansing fountain

*"In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness", Zechariah 13:1.*

*"In that day"* is a common phrase in the Old Testament prophetic books. It usually indicates the 'last day' that is, the period of great trouble immediately before Christ's visible return to rule the whole world. From the context, it could also mean the time referred to in the Zechariah 12 but, since that chapter has been talking about the period leading up to the return of Christ, that would amount to the same thing. In that day a fountain will be prepared to cleanse people. The metaphor is fairly straightforward - water is for washing things clean. In a time before hot and cold taps, a fountain would be a handy way to get clean. The water is flowing and will carry any contamination away. The verse tells us plainly that the contamination that needs dealing with comes from "sin and uncleanness." These are things that make all of us unsuitable for God's presence and God must remove them if He is going to bring people back to Himself. We might rejoice in the thought of our sins washed away, but it is not you and I that this verse refers to. We are told the fountain is *"opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem."*

Clearly, the reference is to Jewish people, and this is no surprise since we have seen throughout this book how God is talking about His dealings with that nation at the end of the age. But the reference in this verse is not just to the people in general, it is, first of all, to the house of David. That means the kings and rulers. These people were the leaders of the nation, and they were responsible for leading the people into sinful practices for generation after generation. The cleansing needs to start with the family of the kings. The second group mentioned are the inhabitants of Jerusalem. These are the people living in the capital city and therefore closest to the kings. It is fair to say, they have been led astray by the kings, who have the greater responsibility. However, they were often very willing to be led into wrongdoing, and have their own responsibility. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were some of Jesus' strongest opponents and those who had Him killed by Pilate. God starts His cleansing with the most guilty and provides

cleansing for them. That cleansing can only come from the death and resurrection of Jesus Himself. If God has given us any position of responsibility or influence we must make sure that we use it well. When we fail, we can be thankful for *"the blood of Jesus Christ [that] cleanses us from all sin"* 1 John 1:7.

### No more idols

*"It shall be in that day", says the LORD of hosts, "that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they shall no longer be remembered",* Zechariah 13:2a.

One of the chief sins of the kings and the people was the sin of idolatry. They turned their backs on the one true God and worshipped empty idols. Despite vigorous reforms from some of Judah's good kings, like Hezekiah, the nation kept turning right back to idols again and again. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds of them. We are told that God is jealous, that is He strongly objects to His praise and glory being given to others.

As part of the cleansing process, God says He will remove not only all praise of the idols, but all remembrance of them. The idea is that God's people will be so focussed on Him that all interest in, and recollection of, idols will completely vanish. This thought is also found in Hosea 14:8, *"Ephraim shall say, 'What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard and observed Him.'"*

Although we are thinking about the way God will turn the nation of Israel back to Himself, we can't help thinking about the idols in our lives and God's desire to turn us away from them and completely to Him.

### No more false prophets

*"I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land. It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot him will say to him, "You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the LORD." And his father and mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesies. And it shall be in that day that every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive. But he will say, "I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for a man taught me to keep cattle from my youth." And one will say to him, "What are these wounds between your arms?" Then he will answer, "Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.'"*, Zechariah 13:2b-6

The worship of idols was also connected with false prophets. The real prophets were sent by God to announce His words and turn the people back to Him. The idol worshippers had prophets of their own, false prophets, who told lies and provided false comfort for the people. Often they would directly contradict the message of the true prophets. Even when the people had got a long way from God they would still mix in some mention of Jehovah with their idolatry. So the false prophets would sometimes claim that their messages were from Jehovah.

In fact, prophesy seems to have been so corrupt in Zechariah's day that he doesn't refer to false prophets, he simply reports God as saying *"I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land"* Zechariah 13:2. These prophets were not activated by the Holy Spirit; they were moved by unclean spirits to tell lies. In that future day there won't be any need for prophets, since God will speak directly for Himself. So, anybody claiming to prophesy must be false. This will be so abhorred that even a man's own parents will condemn such a person to death. Once again this emphasises the total commitment of this people to God and His ways. No tie is more natural, or stronger, than that of parents to children, but both parents are united in the condemnation of the son because he has *"spoken lies in the name of the LORD"* (Zechariah 13:3)

Instead of announcing their messages to all who will listen, the false prophets will be ashamed of their visions. The robe of coarse hair seems to have been something that distinguished the prophets. Initially, it was a garment that Jehovah's true messengers wore, but the false messengers copied the style and tried to pass themselves off as real. It happens in every age that false teachers try to resemble the real thing as much as possible in external matters, but can be recognised by the things that they say.

Once false prophets become universally condemned, they will be as anxious to disclaim the role of prophet as they once were to claim it! They would rather claim to be simple farmers than prophets. The exchange about *"wounds between your arms"* (Zechariah 13:6) seems to refer to the habit of the idol worshippers of cutting themselves during their petitions to the false gods. If you read the account of the challenge between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, which you can find in 1 Kings 18:20-40, they cut themselves in the frenzy of their requests to Baal. It appears that the person questioning the suspected prophet asks what the cut marks on his arms are, and the vague response is an attempt to deny they are anything to do with idol worship and prophesy.

## Christ's death

*"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, against the Man who is My Companion," says the LORD of hosts. 'Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'", Zechariah 13:7a*

As we commented at the start, we know that this section refers to Christ because Jesus quotes it Himself in Matthew 26:31, *"Then Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"* So we have moved out of the time sequence of the rest of the chapter, and gone back to look at something that happened thousands of years earlier, at Christ's first coming. This is not quite as odd as it might first appear. God is about to start speaking again about the judgement of His people, and the height of their sin was their rejection of their Messiah. It also marks the time when God stopped leading and caring for Israel as a nation and distanced Himself from them. We might wonder why there is no mention at all of the church or the two thousand plus years when the gospel will have been preached, but the church was not revealed in the Old Testament, and the topic of Zechariah is how God deals with Israel, not the church.

In Zechariah 10:2-3, Zechariah, like others of the prophets, has described the people as like sheep without a shepherd. In Zechariah 11:4-12 he has described the appointment of false shepherds who have no affection, or care, for the sheep. Here he speaks about the one God describes as 'My Shepherd'. Sometimes the Old Testament prophets speak about the coming Messiah as the shepherd for God's people; sometimes it is Jehovah Himself who is the shepherd.

Listen to Isaiah 40:10-11, *"Behold the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young."* We instantly recognise a reference to Christ as the Good Shepherd of John 10:11, but clearly Isaiah is talking about God. There is no contradiction of course, because Jesus **is** God! So when we read in Zechariah, God talking about 'My Shepherd' and 'the Man who is My Companion', we recognise a reference, not just to Jesus as a man, but to Jesus as God. God is the ultimate Shepherd of His people and only one who is equal with God can be described by God as 'My Companion'.

The Bible regularly looks at the same event from different perspectives, and ascribes the actions and responsibilities to different parties. This is especially true of the cross. Sometimes the New Testament writers address the responsibility of the people who crucified Jesus, and place the responsibility firmly with them. For example, Peter addressing the crowd in Acts 3:14-15 says, *"But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life."* At other times they speak about the sovereign purposes of God and emphasise God's action. For example, Peter in Acts 4:27-28, talking about the same events, says to God, *"For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done."* In Zechariah 13:7, the sovereign actions of God are being emphasised and it is God Who calls for the sword to awake against the Shepherd and issues the command to *"strike the Shepherd."*

Since the shepherd leads the sheep, if you strike down the shepherd, then the sheep will scatter. The primary application Jesus gives this in Matthew 26:31 is that the disciples will be scattered at His death, although He goes on to speak about gathering them again after His resurrection. Since the disciples were Jews as well as the first of the Christians, they can sometimes represent both groups, as they appear to do here. As a result of Jesus death the whole nation of Israel, who should have accepted Jesus as their Shepherd and their God, are scattered. As Christian believers the disciples are gathered again, but the nation as a whole remains scattered - not entirely forgotten by God, but no longer actively acknowledged as the people of God until the days to come that Zechariah is writing about.

## Judgement and refining

*"Then I will turn My hand against the little ones. And it shall come to pass in all the land," say the LORD, 'That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, but one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested'", Zechariah 13:7b-9a.*

We might say that God turning His hand against the little ones began soon after the cross. From the destruction of Jerusalem to the holocaust of the Second World War, there are very many examples of suffering for the Jewish people. But Zechariah takes us back to the last days (and therefore back into time sequence) when he speaks about a judgement that will result in the death of two thirds of the nation. The sufferings of all the years from the cross until today are a result of God turning away from His people, but the direct cause of those sufferings has been the cruelty of other human beings. In a future day, the prophecies of God about devastating final judgements, especially on the nation of Israel, will be fulfilled and the direct cause will be the actions of God.

Ezekiel 5 also has a reference to judgement of Israel by thirds. *"One-third of you shall die of the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst; and one-third shall fall by the sword all around you; and I will scatter another third to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them"*, Ezekiel 5:12. Both in Ezekiel and Zechariah, two-thirds are killed outright in judgement. The other third is brought through more protracted suffering and some of that third are proved to be true and faithful. In Zechariah 13:7-9, two-thirds of the people in the land of Israel *"shall be cut off and die."* The fact that they are spoken of as 'cut-off' means that their death is a direct result of God's judgement and they will pass into eternal punishment. The other third certainly don't go straight into blessing! Being brought 'through the fire' suggests trial, testing and suffering. We should not think that all this one-third are saved. Other scriptures state that only a 'remnant', a comparatively small number will be saved.

The first picture we are given is that of a silver refining process. In this process you start with a mixed silver ore that is part silver, part rock and part other impurities. The volume of pure silver at the end of the refining process is much less than the volume of ore at the beginning! The process is fierce and the elements that are not pure silver are discarded. In the second picture the gold is referred to as being tested rather than refined. The thought is very similar, but the emphasis is on proving what (or who) is real rather than removing the dross.

We know that God sometimes allows testing in our lives to refine our character and prove the reality of our faith, but this refining of Israel is something much sterner. It is occurring during the cataclysmic happenings related in the book of Revelation, so the 'fire' will be unimaginably fierce and the judgements are on account of the many centuries of disobedience and unfaithfulness by the nation; most importantly their rejection and murder of their own Messiah.

The sufferings will only come to an end when the Shepherd returns to rescue the small number of real believers in the flock - the refined silver and tested gold.

### Restoration to God

*"They will call on My name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; and each one will say, 'The LORD is my God'"* Zechariah 13:9b.

After so many years of idolatry and calling on the name of any number of gods, they will finally call on God by name and the God who has refused to listen to them because of their disobedience, will answer them. The final words have echoes of the book of Hosea. In Hosea one of the prophet's children is named Lo-ammi, which means literally 'not my people'. *"For you are not My people, and I will not be your God"*, says God in Hosea 1:9. Later, in Hosea 3:23, Hosea tells of a day when God's words will be, *"Then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!'"*

I always love to see how God completes everything that He starts. I have said this several times in these radio talks down the years, but in a world full of unfulfilled potential, broken promises and never completed projects, it always thrills me to contemplate a God without failure, Who concludes every project and does 'all things well!' God started working with Israel thousands of years ago and, in spite of all their failure and sin, He will complete His work and restore a renewed nation to Himself. God has special blessings for His church and will complete the good work He has begun in each member of that body, but there are distinct blessings for Israel that God is equally bound to fulfil.

Although the blessing is for a nation, each one comes as an individual. The chapter ends, *"each one will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"* Relationship with God is always a personal thing. Each individual must say for themselves 'my God'. The word 'my' does not carry any sense of possession, it is not a god that I own, or have a special right to. It is an acknowledgement that He is God to **me**. He has the rights to claim **my** worship, obedience, love - everything that I have and am, because He is my God. This is nothing less than the restoration of the relationship that was broken by disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

Let us always rejoice in the blessings that God has shown to us individually, in our families and in our churches. Let us also rejoice in His blessings shown to Christians in all places and at all times. Then let us rejoice in the blessings God has reserved for the nation of Israel. God rejoices in showing grace, and all these things are parts of His own glory. Let us all join together to praise the Shepherd against Whom the sword was turned that so many might be saved!

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