

Zech 4/4; Zechariah 12:1-14

Preface:

Well, People of God. We're in our last week of Zechariah, and from here will go into our last of the Minor Prophets, Malachi.

Today's passage is in the Second Part of Zechariah. And it's the second "burden" or prophecy that Zechariah has to share. We're only talking about the first half or so of it, all of Chapter 12. Chapter 13 goes on to give great promises, set great expectations:

that God will cleanse His People of their sin and impurity, that Israel will undergo a winnowing, a loss of great numbers, and only some small part will finally be God's People as they were meant to be.

But in Chapter 12 we'll see things that were important for Zechariah's audience to hear, and were incredibly important for the early Church, which understood them in light of Jesus. Let's talk about it. We'll pray first.

Prayer:

Three Parts:

Chapter 12 of Zechariah is really divided into three Parts. The first is just an introduction, but it is its own thing:

12:1: "A prophecy: The word of the Lord concerning Israel."

And we remember that what's translated "prophecy" here is "burden." Whatever Zechariah has to share about Israel is heavy, something to be carried. And he's passing it on.

But then two distinct chunks of Zechariah follow:

12:1c-9: Promises to Judah & Jerusalem

12:10-14: Weeping in Jerusalem

These two passages seem to have basically nothing in common; there is no causal connection between the two. God promises to protect Judah and Jerusalem, as we'll see, then goes on to talk about the grief that they'll feel when they, as God seems to put it, kill Him...and not him. There's some weird phrasing going on. Before we get to that, let's talk about these promises to Judah and Jerusalem that God makes.

12:1c-9: Promises to Judah & Jerusalem

We read this, Zechariah's "burden":

The Lord, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the human spirit within a person, declares: 2 "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. 3 On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. 4 On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness," declares the Lord. "I will keep a watchful eye over Judah, but I will blind all the horses of the nations. 5 Then the clans of Judah will say in their hearts, 'The people of Jerusalem are

strong, because the Lord Almighty is their God.'

6 "On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a firepot in a woodpile, like a flaming torch among sheaves. They will consume all the surrounding peoples right and left, but Jerusalem will remain intact in her place.

7 "The Lord will save the dwellings of Judah first, so that the honor of the house of David and of Jerusalem's inhabitants may not be greater than that of Judah. 8 On that day the Lord will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the angel of the Lord going before them. 9 On that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem.

12:1-9: Everyone Matters

There are things to see in this passage.

There's the major theme of the way Jerusalem will be important and special, of course. God says Jerusalem will be an "immovable rock," will "remain intact," but so will the rest of Judah. Jerusalem is important; but so are all those towns, villages, and people outside Jerusalem, in wider Judah.

This is significant. God is making sure that these rural villages, the small towns and settlements and outposts of Judah, which are days of travel away aren't less important, aren't forgotten by God. Sometimes I leave weeds in my garden that the bugs love, because they attack the weed and ignore the plants I'm intentionally growing. They're

sacrificed, like the rural border towns of Judah have been sacrificed dozens of times, ignored as this or that emperor blows through Judah and attacks Jerusalem. But here God says “The Lord will save the dwellings of Judah first, so that the honor of the house of David and of Jerusalem’s inhabitants may not be greater than that of Judah.” Yes, Jerusalem will be saved; but not at anyone’s expense.

We could talk about this in so many ways, but it’s an important thing to consider: God is taking into account any feelings of being neglected, any worry about their defenselessness, and affirming the experience of his rural people, even as God promises them that their honor is just as important as Jerusalem’s. But God isn’t allowing Jerusalem to lose its place of importance in their eyes. Jerusalem is special, is the place of God’s Temple, is important. But all Judah and Jerusalem share God’s protective attention. Knowing this will keep those Judean towns from rolling over if an enemy marches through; they’re given a role, to protect, with God’s power, Jerusalem, because they are all of a piece; the Land where God resides with His People. Their destinies are tied together. This is a really remarkable thing for God to say in a time when city-states were the main way people organized themselves, and those villages and towns that weren’t capital cities were always threatened with destruction by their enemies and abandonment by their own rulers.

12:1-9: Protection On That Day:

Over and over we hear “On that day,” which is a marker to us: This is final judgment stuff. Future stuff for Zechariah’s audience. And the promise that God makes is simply that

Judah and Jerusalem will be protected from their enemies.

12:1-9: Surrounded By Enemies

And how this passage treats the nations around Israel is interesting.

Now, we see in all sorts of places the promise that Jerusalem will be the center of the earth; that nations will stream to it and the Temple and recognize God.

We talked last week about the way Jesus seems to reimagine this whole theme of the prophets: Instead of “restoring the Kingdom to Israel,” as his disciples ask after his resurrection, Jesus sends them out into the world.

The prophets expected God to draw all the people of the world to Jerusalem’s Temple, to meet God; Jesus reframes this. Instead, his followers are to be to the world, through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, the ones by whom God can meet people. Judah becomes the whole world, and the Temple’s got wheels. Or feet, I guess.

But what’s weird in this passage is that instead of the nations of the world streaming to Jerusalem to worship God, God presents the nations gathering around Judah in order to destroy it. In Chapter 9, Zechariah envisioned Jerusalem’s king coming in peace, disarming Jerusalem, and ruling over the nations around them peacefully, and then God Himself will appear over Jerusalem, protecting them from their enemies. Something like this happens again, minus the arrival of a peaceable king.

And in fact, there’s parallel construction between Chapter 9

and Chapter 12:

9:1-13: Discussion of Enemies, Jerusalem, Arrival of Peaceable King

9:14-17: God Appears Over Jerusalem; His People are “attractive and beautiful,” “thrive” as a result

12:1-9: Discussion of Enemies, Jerusalem w/ Judah; Multiple Mentions of “David” (Ideal King Model)

12:10-14: God (or representative) is pierced (“me” and “him”); His People grieve as a result.

Why does this matter? It matters in this way: These two passages are linked to each other, parallel each other. Whether or not they’re talking about the same, oh, series of events isn’t clear. Frankly, I think that the second is a recapitulation, a revisit to the same moment, almost an alternative timeline understanding of that moment, which is something we see happen in Revelation, too. We could talk more about that if you want. Not now. I gave us a clipping from an old Revelation message on this if you want it.

But they are taking up the same themes, these two passages. They parallel each other. And the New Testament quotes chapter 9, suggesting the “burden” that Zechariah passed on there was realized in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The New Testament also quotes Chapter 12, saying that when Jesus was pierced in the side by a Roman soldier, that it happened in order to “fulfill,” that is, make real, meet the expectations, of what Zechariah says here.

And what Zechariah says is this:

12:10-14: Weeping in Jerusalem

10 “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit[a] of grace and supplication. They will look on[b] me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. 11 On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be as great as the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. 12 The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, 13 the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, 14 and all the rest of the clans and their wives.

This last part that talks about the clans and their weeping seems to be just a way to talk about how great that grief is; four clans may echo the four cardinal points, connecting the people with the land and basically allowing Zechariah to say that everyone everywhere will be sad. God, through Zechariah, makes reference to an event that happened on the Plain of Megiddo, which we can read about in 2 Kings 23. Good King Josiah marched out there, against Egypt’s Pharaoh and Assyria’s King, and was killed. It was, apparently, a time of incredible mourning; and why not, right, because that’s when Judah started to really fall apart, as Josiah’s wicked son Jehoahaz took over, and the beginning of Judah’s exile and the first Temple’s destruction started to gain steam.

But what Chapter 12 says was fulfilled--realized--in Jesus was

this:

10 “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit[a] of grace and supplication. They will look on[b] me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

And it’s just really, really hard for me to read this and not connect it to Jesus, too. I don’t know in what ways Zechariah meant it to connect to his people, because, frankly, I’m so deeply shaped by reading it through Jesus, which Christians are called to do. In just a few verses God is going to promise to “on that day” cleanse Israel from all their sin and their impurity. Here God promises to pour out “a spirit--or “The Spirit,” both are valid--of grace and supplication.” The NIV reads “mercy,” here, but that clouds the issue. Supplication is just, oh, an attitude of prayerfulness, beggarliness. God promises to pour out on Israel grace--favor, active affection--and it’s pursuit. Israel will fall to their knees, and want more of what good they’re receiving.

And then:

They will look on[b] me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

12:10-14: Object Of Attention

We’ll notice, here, that the object of their attention changes.

God's People stab someone. At first, that one is called "me" by God, and then, later, "him." And...it's weird. Given the way Chapter 12 parallels Chapter 9, and all the mentions of David we've seen, Zechariah probably has in mind the murder of a king, but a king murdered by his own people. But for God to claim such a close identity with this king that God can say it's him, himself, who is stabbed through...is weird. It's like nothing we've ever seen.

Until, of course, Jesus shows up, and makes the same claims, only from the underside, claims that God the Father affirms through miracles, voices, and resurrection. And this verse of Zechariah's, which John and the early church saw as fulfilled in that moment when Jesus was stabbed, pierced in his side, and blood and water started gushing, this verse really is a witness to the mystery of what we call the Trinity, that Jesus was both fully human, and fully divine. More than just God's representative, but somehow God, too. We could mine Zechariah's verse for more parallels, if we wanted, noting the way Peter "grieves bitterly" at his betrayal of Jesus, how Jesus himself is called God's "son," "firstborn over all creation."

So both Chapter 9 and Chapter 12, which are linked which are thematically linked with one another in Zechariah, are themselves linked with Jesus, each in their own way.

12:10-14: Realized In Jesus

Whatever else the New Testament authors thought about the events "on that day" that Zechariah was talking about, they saw them realized in Jesus. And if we just step back in the slightest way we see God protecting His People from their

enemies. We see God promising his own presence with His People in a radical way, and with it favor, grace, humility. We see God bringing equality among them; no one is expendable or cannon fodder, but all are important. We see that emphasis on the land and the Temple, which Jesus, who has the authority to do it, turns on its head, as his followers become the Temple, Jerusalem, sent out into the world. We see a king whose arrival brings peace, who God identifies so closely with that God says it's him who is pierced. These are the things Zechariah sees in these parallel chapters; the early church looked at this list and said, "Yeah. That's happened. That's now. This is Jesus' stuff." And if this is coming true, all the greatest hopes that we've had for God to make good on his promises are coming true, too.

Conclusion: Live Easy For Jesus

We have to take the same broad view, here. You can find entire articles written on the symbolic or allegorical meaning of the listing of the clans in Chapter 12. That's...well. You know that I think that's a waste of time.

And I think it's a waste of time not because I'm just so sophisticated. I think it's a waste of time first of all because we only have so much time, and second, because the earliest Church didn't care about that. They cared about the truth that Jesus was the fulfillment of what they'd been longing for, and that they were now a new thing in reality, something the universe had never seen before. They were the Temple on wheels, bearers of the Good, weird, shocking, silly News that death was dying out, and everything bad with it. Jesus had set them free, and set them forth, and it was enough for them. Don't waste time when you have so little of it, or energy looking for patterns and secret wisdom. Ours is

public wisdom: Become like Christ. No longer live for yourself, but be crucified with Christ, for Christ lives in you.

Conclusion: Zechariah & Jesus:

And I tried last week to position us to get a glimpse of the way God has, through a thousand twitches of history, worked it out that Zechariah's burdens 3,000 years ago are our blessings today. We're the recipients of promises he thought were only for him and his people. I'm not going to do that again.

Conclusion: The Outskirts Matter

And the early Church saw Jesus as the realization of both these parallel passages from Zechariah. Fundamental to today's passage is the reality that the outskirts matter; that the edges matter as much as the center. Jerusalem is important; the home of God's Temple, but it's not more important than the rest of Judah, the land where God's People dwell.

And now we, who are the Temple, bearing God's Spirit of "grace and humble prayer" we dwell all over the place. None of us are cannon-fodder. None of us are expendable. There is no distinction between the place or person who gets all the attention, and the place or person who gets little.

Metaphorical megacities, or metaphorical crossroads, neither is more important than the other. We are a small congregation; are we less special to God than those whose monthly budget is greater than our annual one? No. There are brethren churches with 30 people in the middle of nowhere; are we more important than them?

Catches a little, doesn't it? The "right answer" is no.

For God to praise Judah's outskirts it to humble Jerusalem's pride; for God to lift up Judah's unimportant cities is for God to lift up Jerusalem, which was so clearly important. We people are always vacillating between feeling special and important, noticed and praised, or unimportant and disregarded, forgotten and dismissed. God intentionally points out how important all His People in the Land are. And for a passage that is fulfilled in Jesus, we have to realize that we who are Jesus' body on earth until he returns, there's none of us that are more critical than any other.

Do this, then: If you need humbled, because you're thinking you're pretty amazing, lean into that Spirit of earnest prayer that you've got, and talk to God about it. If you need lifted up, because you feel disregarded or ignored or whatever, then do the same thing.

My hope for all of us is that we no longer care what anyone thinks about us. That we recognize God doesn't show favoritism, that we care very little if we're judged by someone, that we don't even judge ourselves. All that matters to us is living for Christ as fully as we can.

And next time someone says to you--like they're always doing--"Zechariah is just so crazy, I don't know what's going on." Let them know: "Oh! It's all about God making good on his promises to Israel. It's a book encouraging returned exiles to rebuilt the Temple, and promising them that someday, in the far future, all their great fears would pass. God worked that out through Jesus; and is working it out still, in me and you until Jesus returns."