

For the next few Sunday evenings, we will be looking at the visions that make up roughly the first third of the book of Zechariah. Zechariah's visions are structured in pairs so that each one mirrors the other. Vision 1 anticipates the judgement of the nations and in vision 8 judgement is executed. At the time of Zechariah the Israelites were returning home after 70 years, but there are many problems because the people were spiritually broken, still reeling from the time they had spent in exile at the hands of their enemies. They were still under the control of a foreign king, (v 7). But God appointed Zechariah as a prophet to aid in the spiritual rebuilding of his people.

Vision 1 One night, in the 24th of Shebat, during the second year of Darius, Zechariah received his first vision. He saw a man seated on a red horse among the myrtle trees a ravine, with other horses behind him, red, brown and white. *"And they reported to the angel of the LORD who was standing among the myrtle trees." (v11)* It is agreed among the majority of Christian commentators that the angel of the LORD in the Old Testament is a pre-incarnate appearance of the Christ. He's probably in the Kidron Valley near Jerusalem. Myrtle trees are beautiful shrubs which give off a pleasant smell. The valley possibly symbolises the lowly state if God's people. Their riders were sent throughout world and return with what seems to be a good message. *"We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at peace."* Don't we long for that? Peace in the world. But the Lord finds it a cause for lament, (v12). *"LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been very angry with for seventy years?"*

The nations that oppressed and abused, captured and enslaved God's people, were enjoying peace and tranquillity, while God's people were in a mess politically, economically, and most importantly spiritually. The ones who treated God's people outrageously are the ones who should be feeling the weight of judgement. God's people are the ones who should be enjoying peace. But the LORD speaks kind and comforting words that the angel passes on to Zechariah. Where is each one of us spiritually this evening? Maybe we feel beaten up trials and tribulations, or we are feeling the full weight and guilt of our sin. Maybe we are anxious and are worried about the future state of the church. We need the Lord to speak words of comfort to us. The message Zechariah receives is a wonderful message of comfort for the people, and entirely relevant to us. *"I am very jealous of Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they went too far with their punishment." (v14-15)* We will come back to this statement. This vision is to comfort us by reminding us of God's zeal and jealousy for his people. His anger at those who mistreat them, and the solution he will act for his glory is good for his people and devastating for his enemies. The judgement of these enemies is in vision 8.

Vison 8: 6:1-8 In vision 1 Zechariah saw four chariots, each is pulled by different coloured horses: red, black, white and dappled. They are coming from between two bronze mountains, the place of the strength and security where God himself dwells. Solomon placed two bronze pillars at the entrance of the temple where God dwelled. (2 Kings 7:13-14).

Zechariah asks an angel, 'What are these, my lord?' They are the four spirits of heaven going out of God's presence into the whole earth. The black horses go to the north. The NIV says the white ones go west and the ESV says they were following. The dappled ones go south, possibly heading to Egypt. The activity of the red horses isn't given. However, all of them it seems go throughout the whole earth, (v 7), to unfold God's purposes in the world. God is the one who has complete dominion over everything. Even when things are difficult, when the world appears to be going pear-shaped, when we suffer personally, when our brothers and sisters around the world are being persecuted, we would do well to remember that God is working out his purposes in the world for his glory and our good. No-one else has that power. Neither you nor I can unfold our own purposes in the world. Things do not go according to our plan and when they do, it's God's doing. The dice is rolled but God determines how they fall. So, when the world seems like it's broking apart and when our lives get harder and harder, when our plans and timings are frustrated, remember God knows and is working out his purposes for our good. So, trust in him!

But there is a special focus on those who go to the north. (v 8) *"Look, those going towards the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north".* North is the direction of Babylon who

was the nation that came and took God's people into exile back in 2 Kings 25. The cause of distress for the man among the myrtle trees was that the whole earth was at rest but not the people of God who were still struggling and under the thumb of those hostile to them. So, here as judgment is executed on the nation that deals so harshly with God's people, it is now the Lord who is at rest having fulfilled his purposes, restored his people and avenged them! This vision simply shows us that God will avenge his people. Both visions reveal three wonderful truths about God. He's jealous and zealous for his people. He's vengeful against their enemies. He's hungry for his own glory.

The LORD's jealousy. Normally we think of jealously as sin because so often our own human jealously is fuelled by a desire to have what we have no right to. God is very different. Because as creator and sustainer all things belong to him in the first place He can't be sinfully jealous like us. And God has a specific jealously for his people, so, when his people reject him, it's a problem. That is precisely the tragic story of Israel up until this very point. God chose Abraham and his descents to be a blessing to the world. Then we have the patriarchs followed by Moses and how he led the people out of slavery in Egypt. The Law gave them such a different way of life from the pagan nations around them. They would be like those vibrantly coloured, sweet smelling myrtle trees in the ravine. The most important of the Laws was they were to worship, the LORD God who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, and him alone! But they quickly adopted the practices of the nations around them and even made room for their gods in the Temple and in their hearts. Time after time, God warned them through the pre-exilic Prophets to turn back, but they didn't listen so, the LORD. Fuelled by his jealously for his own people and their heartbreaking rejection of him, he punished them. When we sin, when other things get in the way of true worship, of giving God the right glory he deserves from us, it is grieves him. He deserves to be the most important thing in our lives because of who he is and what he has done for us.

Is loving God and serving him the one thing that trumps all? When other things take the place of the Lord in our lives, like career, money, comfort and security and they become a rival that competes for our affection of him, we commit idolatry and the same call goes out to us, as it did to the returned exiles: REPENT! Turn away from idols and back to the Lord! But his jealously is also revealed in **vengefulness** against those who would do harm to his people. Notice verse 1:15, "*I am very angry with the nations that feel secure"*. The horsemen return with a report that the rest of the world is at peace. They are the ones who oppressed the Lord's people for so long and then took them into exile. Now the Lord was angry with his people for their idolatry but, that anger towards his own people was nothing compared with his fury towards the nations that harmed his people. We see here the paradox that God's sovereignty does not take away human responsibility. Ironically, these nations are not safe even if they feel safe for they have touched the apple of God's eye. It's a stern warning to the world that stands against Christ and his church! It is not a safe place to stand because God is holily vengeful. Cows are on the whole are fairly docile but if they feel that you pose a threat to their calf, get out there of there. They will attack. And we're very similar! If someone harms the apple of your eye, we react with fury.

God is also **hungry for his own glory.** Therefore, this is what the LORD says*: I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. …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."* God will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there his house will be built. All of this was fulfilled. Read Haggai to find out more. But it's in Jesus that we see this fulfilled completely. Hundreds of years after this the Son of God himself visited Jerusalem in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and died on a cross. (see Zechariah 12:10). It is at the cross where God's love and jealousy for his people is revealed in their redemption! The death of Christ buys our forgiveness, so our idolatry is forgiven. He is so jealous for us that he gave up his own Son for us.

In his vengefulness Satan himself, has his head crushed beneath the wounded feet of Jesus at the cross. As the Old Welsh hymn says: "*Faith, see the place, and see the tree/ where heaven's Prince, instead of me, was nailed to bear my shame. Bruised was the dragon by the Son, though two had wounds, there conquered One- and Jesus was his name."* Because at the cross and at the resurrection, God's people, you and I, are redeemed and Satan, sin, and death defeated, God receives all the glory he deserves!

AMEN