

II. “Return to Me”

09-Dec-07 Zechariah 1:2-7

Theme: Even in the midst of our sin, God provides a way of repentance, return, reconciliation, and restoration.

Key Verse: Zechariah 1:3 Therefore say to them, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Return to Me,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

Review

Last week, we began our study of Zechariah’s Night Visions by reviewing material from the book of Ezra to put Zechariah in his historical context. Remember, the people of Judah were sent into captivity in Babylon for seventy years because of their sins of idolatry and apostasy. The Babylonian captivity cured God’s people of these sins, even though other sins would creep in and take their place.

In 538 BC, the Persian king Cyrus issued a proclamation that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple. A small remnant returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. Their work started well, and they reestablished the worship of God and even began construction on the temple in 536 BC. However, fierce opposition arose, and soon the building project halted, destined to lay dormant for sixteen long years.

God was not pleased with His people for their laziness and surrender in the face of opposition, and so He sent leanness into their lives. They struggled to make ends meet – they were poor in number, poor in strength, and poor in material advantages. But then the Lord of hosts stirred up His people to action by sending them two messengers: Haggai and Zechariah.

These two prophets were raised up by God to exhort His people to complete their task of building God’s temple for His glory. Haggai came first, and his ministry got the people moving again. Only a few months later, Zechariah appeared on the scene, and his introductory message of repentance was soon followed by a series of Night Visions that promised the temple would be rebuilt. But Zechariah does not stop at merely the rebuilding of the physical temple; his visions look down the tunnel of time to the work of the greater temple Builder – the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Zechariah the prophet (and priest) was called by God to encourage his countrymen in their historical task of temple construction. He was also called to proclaim the glorious work of God’s Servant, the Branch, who was the Messiah to come. Finally, Zechariah’s message is pertinent for us, as we build up God’s temple – the church – for His glory, in the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ. Behold the Branch!

Introduction

Today, we will try to accomplish two things. First, we will study Zechariah’s opening message, which is a call for repentance (1:2-6). Zechariah’s opening message is very typical of the writing prophets in general. It starts out with the proposition that a holy God is angry at the sin of His unholy people. Ever since Genesis chapter 3, this has been the situation of the world. But even in the midst of our sin, God provides a way of repentance, return, reconciliation, and restoration. This is the gospel message.

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After the exposition of the opening oracle, we will turn our attention to an overview of the eight Night Visions of Zechariah. Thus far, I've spoken about them only in very general terms, but today I want to at least give you a sense of the contents and themes of these visions. In the following weeks we will study each vision in detail, so the purpose of today's overview is to provide the road map for our journey through the Night Visions.

Exposition

A. A Call to Repentance (1:2-6)

1. God's Anger (1:2)

²The LORD has been very angry with your fathers (Zechariah 1:2).

The word of the LORD first came to the prophet Zechariah in the eighth month of the 2nd year of King Darius (1:1), which was toward the end of the year 520 BC. His message followed the first two oracles of Haggai, which were dated in the sixth and seventh months of the same year.

When Haggai first began addressing the Jews two months previously, his message was one of condemnation against the generation in Jerusalem that was at ease in their houses while the temple of the LORD remained in ruins. God called them to "consider your ways!" (Hag. 1:5, 7); ways that led God to limit His blessings upon His sinful people (Hag. 1:9-11). To the credit of the people of God, they listened to Haggai, obeyed the word of the LORD, and began once again the work of building the temple (Hag. 1:12-15).

When Haggai addressed the Jews one month later, it was a message of encouragement. The Jews realized that the glory of this new temple they were building would not be as grand as the earlier temple of Solomon (Hag. 2:3). Nonetheless, God promised them strength in the work as He would be in their midst (Hag. 2:4-5). Furthermore, God declared that He would soon start shaking the nations, and His glory would fill the temple, so that its glory would be greater than it ever was (Hag. 2:6-8).

So, when Zechariah begins addressing the Jews after these two messages by Haggai, we may be rather surprised that he starts out by describing God's anger. After all, God's people were now doing the will of God in obedience and submission to the LORD. In fact, God was encouraging and exhorting them in the exercise of their work. So why is God now angry? In addition, it may be surprising to identify the object of God's anger. It is not focused directly on the people of Zechariah's day; rather God's anger is directed against the "fathers," that is, the previous generations of Israelites.

This declaration of God's anger against the fathers is an objective statement of fact that no Jew could deny. They all knew their history. God had sent prophet after prophet to the Israelites, warning them of wrath to come if they didn't repent of their sins of idolatry and apostasy. These warnings were not empty threats; God did eventually pour out His anger upon that generation of Jews and carry them off into captivity, destroying their country, their society, and the temple.

The evidence was all around the Jews of 520 BC. They were standing in the midst of the desolated temple. They themselves had just returned from Babylon only 18 years before. The sins of the fathers definitely had consequences upon their children to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Dt. 5:9). So, this general statement of God's anger with their forefathers is a not-so-subtle reminder of the consequences of sin. Sin has consequences. Sin brings judgment. God judges sin.

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2. *God's Offer (1:3)*

³Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Return to Me," says the LORD of hosts, "and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts' (Zechariah 1:3).

Verse 3 is the heart of the opening message of Zechariah. It gives the answer to the question implied in verse 2: "If God is angry, how do we avoid His wrath?" The answer is: "Return to God!"

Repentance is a two-part act. "Repentance is both turning from sin and turning to God." Here in verse 3, we have the aspect of repentance which turns toward God. In the next verse, we have the proclamation of turning away from sin (see 1:4). "Repentance is about both our actions and our attitude. These two are inseparable—turning from sin and turning to God. On the one hand, we cannot turn to God except by turning from the sin He abhors; on the other hand, until we come back to God, we simply lack the strength to overcome the sin that holds us in bondage. 'Return to Me, and I will return to you.' That is always the rule of spiritual life and blessing" (Phillips).

But why is Zechariah telling them to repent and return to God? Haven't they done that already? Wasn't that what Haggai chapter 1 was all about, when the people of God listened to His word, obeyed Him, and began working on the temple again? So why does Zechariah start out his prophecy this way? James Jordan points out two reasons why this exhortation from Zechariah might have been necessary.

First, it was true that Zerubbabel, Joshua, and many of the leaders and people of Israel had repented of their sin in failing to rebuild the temple and had returned in repentance to God. But perhaps this return was not complete, and there were still some in the congregation who were sinning in their lack of submission to the word of God. And so the LORD sent a second witness to confirm the word of Haggai and encourage the entire remnant to repent and return to God.

Alternately, we can consider that Zechariah's message of repentance and return was God's exhortation to His people to continue what they had already begun. "Repentance always needs to become deeper and deeper as we move along" (Jordan). The more we know about our holy God and our sinful natures, the more we recognize our need for repentance and forgiveness.

Just like the drill sergeant who continues to instill discipline into his already trained troops, God's prophets are continually reminding us of our need to return to God. This is a message we constantly need to hear. Whenever we sin (daily, hourly, continuously), we need to be reminded that God is ready to love us, forgive us, and accept us if we repent of our sin and return to Him.

Zechariah's description of God's offer is not an isolated one. This is the constant theme of the prophets:

⁶Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. ⁷Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; *let him return to the LORD*, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

¹O Israel, *return to the LORD your God*, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity (Hosea 14:1).

¹²"Now, therefore," says the LORD, "*Turn to Me* with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." ¹³So rend your heart, and not your garments; *return to the*

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LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm (Joel 2:12-13).

³*Seek the LORD*, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger (Zephaniah 2:3).

⁷“Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. *Return to Me, and I will return to you,*” says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:7).

What a God we serve! He is the Lord of hosts – the God who has the legions of heaven at His disposal. He is the powerful God of creation, who makes all things, sustains all things, and controls all things. And yet He stoops down to deal with us – fallen, sinful, rebellious humans. He says to us, “I will return to you.” His grace is overwhelming! “This is our great incentive for repentance, that however great our sin and backsliding, God is ready to receive those who come to Him in repentance and faith. This is the gospel according to Zechariah” (Phillips).

3. *God's Prophets (1:4)*

⁴“Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets preached, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Turn now from your evil ways and your evil deeds.”’ But they did not hear nor heed Me,” says the LORD (Zechariah 1:4).

Zechariah returns to the negative example of the forefathers. God had sent the prophets to them with the consistent message to repent of their sins, primarily of idolatry and apostasy. Yet, the forefathers paid no attention to God's messengers. They ignored them, laughed at them, persecuted them, and failed to take their message seriously. However, they scoffed at God's word at their own peril, for their unbelief ultimately led to their own destruction.

In verse 4, Zechariah alludes to Jeremiah, one of the former prophets:

¹⁵I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, ‘Turn now everyone from his evil way, amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them; then you will dwell in the land which I have given you and your fathers.’ But you have not inclined your ear, nor obeyed Me (Jeremiah 35:15).

Jeremiah wrote these words less than 100 years earlier, and yet they were already considered canonical by the time of Zechariah. How could anyone think otherwise? Jeremiah's predictions had come to pass: Jerusalem had been destroyed along with the temple, and the people had gone into captivity for seventy years.

Perhaps one of Jeremiah's sermons was in Zechariah's mind as he considered the ministry of his spiritual forefather. In Jeremiah chapter 7, the prophet warned the people of his day against trusting blindly in the fact that the temple was in their midst. Apparently, the people of Jerusalem thought of the temple as some sort of good luck charm – no harm could come to them while the temple was standing. And so they engaged in all sorts of wicked and immoral behavior, all the time trusting in these lying words: “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD” (Jer. 7:4).

Now in Zechariah's day, the people of God were busy about the task of rebuilding that temple, but they needed to learn from the example of their fathers. The presence of the old temple had not saved their forefathers, and blind trust in the new temple would not save them either. They

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needed to have the spiritual reality in their lives that the temple represented. They needed God's saving presence to indwell them as His Spirit dwelt in the physical building of God's house.

And so do we. Have we learned from the examples of our spiritual ancestors? Have we taken God's warnings seriously in our lives? Have we listened to the prophets and apostles who have spoken to us the true word of God? The apostle Paul tells us that everything that happened to Israel in the Old Testament was an example for us – a warning of what not to do: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Let us learn from the examples of the fathers and heed the words of the prophets and apostles.

4. God's Word (1:5-6a)

⁵"Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? ⁶Yet surely My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?" (Zechariah 1:5-6a).

Ultimately, the issue is not about the fathers, nor is it about the prophets. All men are under the curse of Adam, and they all die. Rather, the contrast here is between the "permanence of God's word and the temporary nature of man and his institutions" (Robertson). Time is relentless in its forward progression. All men fall in its path; only the word of God remains. Perhaps Zechariah had the words of Isaiah in mind as he wrote:

⁶A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:6-8).

"The thrust of the questions (Zechariah asks) is to bring home the fact that there is no immunity from the march of time. The people are being urged to recognize their need to respond now, while the opportunity is afforded to them. 'Make sure then that you do not neglect the warnings that God's current messengers are bring to you, for rest assured the divine message does not pass away'" (Mackay).

This is the urgency of Zechariah's message. God's word stands forever, but our time is limited. We need to respond in repentance and return to God now, while we have time. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us with the same message:

¹²Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; ¹³but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13).

5. God's People (1:6b)

⁶So they returned and said: 'Just as the LORD of hosts determined to do to us, according to our ways and according to our deeds, so He has dealt with us' (Zechariah 1:6b).

Zechariah's introductory message has been one of repentance and return. "Return to Me" is the theme of the oracle (1:3). And here at the end of the passage, we have the result: "So they returned." The question is, who returned, the fathers, or the current generation?

Some authors, such as Mackay, believe this verse applies to previous generations: "When the punishment of the LORD had come upon them, they were brought to recognize its justice, and

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the folly of the way they had been behaving.” However, by the time God’s judgment fell upon that generation, it was too late. The fathers “blew it.” So I believe, along with most commentators, that Zechariah “is not speaking about the generation that perished in the destruction of Jerusalem, but their successors, those who saw the hand and justice of God in what happened” (Boice).

Here we see the difference between the forefathers and the generation of the restoration. They both heard *and* heeded the words of the prophets (*cp.* 1:4). When God’s message came to them, their hearts were soft and open to spiritual instruction. They “inclined their ear” (Jer. 35:15) to obey the word of God. They submitted to the LORD – they recognized His sovereignty and welcomed His dealings with them, dealings of grace and mercy. For when God’s people return to Him, He returns to them and lavishes His blessings upon them.

This is the message of God to every generation: the need for repentance, return, reconciliation, and restoration to fellowship with the LORD. It was the message of Jesus at His first advent: “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Mt. 4:17). It was the message of the apostles: Peter preached, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19); and Paul declared, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

And this is the message to our generation as well, not only to those who are lost in their sin, but also to us who already believe. I think that many of Zechariah’s generation were true believers. And yet, they needed this exhortation to repent and return, and so do we. Remember, the more we grow in our sanctification, the more we recognize that we need His grace. Instead of closing the holiness gap between us and God, we more clearly realize how wide the gulf between our righteousness and that of God truly is. “Repentance always needs to become deeper and deeper as we move along” (Jordan).

B. Introducing the Night Visions (1:7)

1. Date

⁷On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet (Zechariah 1:7).

So, Zechariah’s first prophetic oracle is a call to repentance, and the people respond positively to his message. The next time the word of the LORD comes to a prophet, it is Haggai, not Zechariah, who speaks. Haggai records his last two oracles on the 24th day of the ninth month, the month following Zechariah’s opening exhortation.

Haggai’s first oracle in the ninth month describes how the people of God were formerly unclean and the works of their hands were also unclean (Hag 2:14). However, God has declared on the 24th day of the ninth month, the very day in which the foundation stone for the temple was laid, that they are now clean and that He will bless them from this point forward (Hag. 2:18-19). Thus, it appears from context that the repentance of the people recorded by Zechariah in the eighth month (1:6) has led to further obedience and blessing by God in the ninth month.

After a short personal oracle to Zerubbabel the governor (Hag. 2:20-23), Haggai’s prophetic work was finished. However, the work on the reconstruction of the temple had just barely begun. It would take another four years before it was complete. Thus, God comes to Zechariah

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once again, this time in the eleventh month of the same year (February, 519 BC), exactly two months after Haggai's last two messages. The substance of God's revelation to Zechariah on the 24th day of the eleventh month is the Night Visions of Zechariah.

The 24th day of the month is a recurring motif in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. After Haggai's first message on the first day of the sixth month, the people of God responded by restarting the temple reconstruction project on the 24th day of the sixth month. Three months later, on the 24th day of the ninth month, the cornerstone of the temple was laid, and as a result Haggai's third message declared that they were now clean and God would bless them. And then five months to the day after the project work restarted, on the 24th day of the eleventh month, Zechariah is given a series of visions to encourage the builders to persevere in their work.

It is not clear what the significance of the 24th day is, apart from its constant repetition in the books of Haggai and Zechariah. Perhaps it is repeated to draw attention to the date that reconstruction started on the temple. After all, the Night Visions of Zechariah are definitely concerned with the temple project.

2. Content

The Night Visions are contained in Zechariah 1:7-6:8. Altogether, there are eight separate visions; although Meredith Kline argues persuasively that there are seven (he considers the sixth and seventh as one vision in two parts). However, for the purposes of this class, we will treat them as eight visions. Following the eight visions is a passage (6:9-15) that is often considered an appendix; it is closely related to but separate from the visions.

All eight of the visions were given in a single, probably exhausting night! We should consider these visions to be continuous in their revelation over the course of that night, starting after sundown and ending near sunrise. The purpose of these visions was to provide further encouragement to the Jews of 520 BC to continue in the work of temple building to which they had been called. Although not always obvious, we should consider the context or location of the visions to be related to the temple, since the temple reconstruction is the historical background for this revelation of God's word.

The visions are linked by their common origin, context, and means of revelation. In addition, certain features, such as an interpreting angel, recur throughout the visions. Many of the visions consist both of a visual element as well as an oracle or spoken pronouncement. In some cases, the main content is the visual element, while in other visions, the oracles are more prominent. The content of the visions is connected as well, since they build upon one another in the series.

In the short time we have left, I want to describe the eight visions briefly. We will return and visit each one in detail in subsequent weeks. The purpose of the description here is to introduce you to the visual elements and themes of these visions.

The first vision (1:7-17) is of a man, later identified as the Angel of the LORD, seated on a red horse in the midst of a grove of myrtles, located in a ravine. Messengers on other colored horses are reporting back to the Angel of the LORD that all the earth is resting quietly. Following this report, the Angel of the LORD prays to God, and then "good and comforting words" are proclaimed to the prophet. The essence of the oracle is to explain that God is angry with the nations at ease, and that He is returning to Jerusalem where His temple will be rebuilt. These two concepts – God's wrath at the nations, and God's favor upon Jerusalem and the temple – will be taken up in the next two visions.

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The second vision (1:18-21) comes in two parts. Zechariah first sees four horns – symbolic of powers that have scattered God’s people. Then, Zechariah sees four craftsmen who come to cast down the oppressors of God’s people. This vision is linked thematically to the first vision. It is an amplification of God’s judgment upon the nations, upon those who resist Him, and upon those who oppose His people.

The third vision (2:1-13) is of a man with a measuring line, measuring the city of Jerusalem. We are told that Jerusalem will be like a city without walls, because it will be so large. Furthermore, God says that He will be a wall of fire around her and be the glory in her midst. The vision concludes with an oracle to flee the north country because God’s judgment is coming upon the nations, but that many Gentiles will be added to God’s people. This vision is a continuation of the first and second, showing God’s judgment on the nations and His blessing upon His people.

The fourth vision (3:1-10) is of Joshua, the high priest, standing before the Angel of the LORD in filthy clothing, with Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. The Angel of the LORD rebukes Satan and clothes Joshua in clean robes and puts a clean turban on his head. The vision continues with an oracle announcing the coming work of the Branch, the Messiah who was to come. This vision is a wonderful picture of justification, of how God cleanses His chosen people. It is not enough to be chosen by God, we must also be cleansed by God of our sin.

The fifth vision (4:1-14) is of two olive trees continuously feeding golden oil into a beautiful golden lampstand. This golden lampstand has a large bowl on the top with seven lamps and forty-nine lights. The vision is a picture of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit in the work of the church, signified by the lampstand. The oracle that is contained within the vision makes a specific application to Zerubbabel, who through the Spirit will complete the construction of the temple. Not only does God justify us, but through the Spirit He sanctifies us for service.

The sixth and seventh visions are closely related. The sixth vision (5:1-4) is of a large flying scroll, with God’s law written on both sides of it. The scroll flies over the land, cursing everyone who breaks it. This vision is a reminder that the covenant community, the golden lampstand of God which has been justified by Jesus Christ, is to live lives of holiness. Judgment begins in the house of God.

The seventh vision (5:5-11) continues this theme of judging wickedness in the land. In this vision, Zechariah sees a large ephah, or basket, with a lead cover containing a woman named “Wickedness.” This ephah with wickedness in it is being carried out of the land by two women with stork wings. The ephah is taken to the land of Shinar (Babylon) where it is set up on a pedestal and established there. In this vision, wickedness is not only judged, but it is removed from the covenant community. God will spare no effort to purge His people of their sin.

Finally, the eighth vision (6:1-8) returns to the motif of horses. In this vision, Zechariah sees four chariots drawn by different colored horses emerging from between two bronze mountains. The chariots go off in judgment throughout the earth. The sovereign Lord of the earth is at work in history, and He will make all things right.

Following the eight night visions is a related appendix (6:9-15). We can tell from the introductory formula (“Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying”) that this oracle is different from the visions that preceded it, although related in content. Zechariah is commanded to take gold and silver that has been brought from Babylon and to fashion it into a crown to set upon the head of Joshua, the high priest. Afterwards, this crown was to be placed in the

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reconstructed temple as a memorial. The crowning of Joshua was accompanied by an oracle announcing the work of the Branch – the Messiah who would be both priest and king, the builder of the greater temple of the LORD.

3. Structure

Introduction: Return to Me (1:1-6)

A Vision One: The Man in the Myrtles (1:7-17)

B Vision Two: Four Horns and Four Craftsmen (1:18-21)

C Vision Three: The Man with the Measuring Line (2:1-13)

X Vision Four: The Cleansing of Joshua (3:1-10)

X' Vision Five: The Golden Lampstand and Two Olive Trees (4:1-14)

C' Vision Six: The Flying Scroll (5:1-4)

B' Vision Seven: The Flying Ephah (5:5-11)

A' Vision Eight: The Four Chariots of God (6:1-8)

Appendix: The Crowning of Joshua (6:9-15)

The overall organization of the eight Night Visions is chiasmic. For example, the first and last visions are clearly linked by the common usage of horses which “walk to and fro throughout the earth” (1:11; 6:7). Likewise, the two central visions are linked not only by their themes of justification and sanctification, but also by their focus on the two leaders of the Jewish remnant, Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor. Other linkages between the various visions will be dealt with as we study the text in more detail.

Conclusion

Zechariah “was granted eight visions which were designed to counter the feelings of weakness and hopelessness that sapped the effectiveness of the covenant community. The visions showed that the LORD had not forgotten His people, and that He would protect them, overthrow their enemies and provide for all the needs of His own people. Although the promises of God start from where the people were then, it is revealed that they reach forward to, and are centered on, the Messiah” (Mackay).

During the rest of this class, we will be going through each of these Night Visions one by one. We will take the time to study their symbolism and their meaning, both in terms of the immediate historical context, as well as in the broader application to the work of Christ and in our own lives.

But as we go through the Night Visions, let us always approach them in a spirit of humility, recognizing that our greatest need is not to understand every detail of these visions, but rather that we need to submit ourselves to a holy and righteous God. “Return to Me,” He declares, because we are sinful creatures and we always need to be reminded to repent and seek forgiveness from our gracious and loving LORD.

Next week: Lesson 3 – The Man in the Myrtles – Zechariah 1:8-12

Close in Prayer.