

XIV. Covenant Renewal

March 8, 2020 Zechariah 8:1-13

Theme: Because God is all powerful and faithful, He keeps the promises He has made to His covenant people; therefore, we must respond in obedience while looking forward in faith to their full consummation.

Aim: To believe God’s covenant promises and to respond in faith while we await their consummation.

Key Verses: ⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, ⁸and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness” (Zechariah 8:7-8).

Review

Last week, we began our study in the second half of the post-exilic prophet Zechariah by looking at chapter 7. Chapters 7 and 8 form a single unit, constructed to answer a question brought to the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. The men of Bethel wanted to know whether or not they should continue to practice the fast days that commemorated the destruction of the original temple. In light of the imminent completion of the temple reconstruction project, this seemed to be a reasonable question.

However, the LORD’s negative answer to this question in 7:4-14, revealed a far more serious issue that first needed to be addressed. Although the fasts in question had a religious veneer, they were undertaken out of self-centered sorrow and pity for their situation rather than for true repentance or God-honoring worship. The LORD’s probing response showed that they had not learned from His prior revelation via the prophets or from the exile of hard-hearted Israel that *true religion does not merely consist of external conformance to religious rituals but rather of a transformed heart that loves both God and neighbor.*

Introduction

In his second epistle to Timothy, the apostle Paul describes the four-fold work of the holy Scriptures upon the lives of believers:

¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

According to the apostle, the aim of Scripture is to make God’s people competent and capable, providing them with the knowledge and character necessary to do His work in the world. This purpose is accomplished through the Word working in our lives in four different ways, two which have a negative aspect and two which have a positive aspect.

The first negative work of God’s Word is “reproof” (*elegmos*), which refers to chastisement or rebuke in order to convict of sinful behaviors or false doctrine. It exposes falsehood, transgression, erroneous belief, and ungodly conduct. The second negative work is “correction” (*epanorthōsis*), which has the root meaning of restoring something to its original upright or

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proper condition. In context, it refers to straightening out sinful lives and conforming attitudes, behaviors, and actions to what is acceptable in God's sight.

Both of these aspects of God's Word are present in Zechariah chapter 7, which contains God's negative response to the question on fasting asked by the delegation from Bethel. Israel's sinful attitudes were exposed and reproofed in 7:4-7. God called them out because they were fasting for all the wrong reasons. They weren't contrite about their sinfulness; instead, they were distressed about their own discomfort. Furthermore, they had forgotten God's Word given to them in the past through the prophets. They obviously needed correction, and so He told them once again in 7:8-10 what they needed to do in order to please Him. True religion does not consist in external conformance to empty religious rituals, but rather in a commitment to love God and neighbor through the exercise of righteous living.

As we come to chapter 8, we encounter the "positive answer" to the question on fasting, which incorporates the two positive works of God's Word from 2 Tim. 3:16: teaching and training. The first positive term, *didaskalian*, can be translated as "teaching," "instruction" or "doctrine." It does not refer to the process or method of learning; rather, it describes the content of instruction, what we are to believe. In context, it specifically refers to the doctrines or truths contained in the God-breathed and inspired Scriptures. The second positive term, *paideian*, often translated as "training," "instruction," or even "discipline," had the original meaning of bringing up and training a child (*paidion*), but it came to be used of any sort of training. "Training in righteousness" thus carries the idea of putting one's faith into action, implementing our beliefs or doctrines into the activities of our daily lives.

God's positive answer to the question of fasting is contained in Zechariah chapter 8. It is full of both teaching and training, what we are to believe and how we are to live. In verses 1-8, there are at least three wonderful covenant blessings that God promises to believers. These are spiritual truths that should not only be appropriated into our own thinking, but they also must govern our behaviors and lifestyles. And in verses 9-13, the LORD challenges His people to action, to respond in obedience to the covenant blessings He has announced.

This introduction leads us to today's lesson from the first 13 verses of Zechariah chapter 8: *Because God is all powerful and faithful, He keeps the promises He has made to His covenant people; therefore we must respond in obedience while looking forward in faith to their full consummation.*

A. Covenant Fulfillment

Before we interact with the text of the "positive answer," we first need to address the issue of how we are to interpret predictive prophecy. In general, prophecy is the authoritative proclamation of the LORD's will for our lives. It is primarily a "forth-telling" of God's Word for His people, given for reproof, teaching, correction, and training in righteousness. This describes much of what is contained within the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. Predictive prophecy, or the "fore-telling" of future events, is only a subset of the entire genre of prophecy. Zechariah chapter 7 is as much a prophetic word from God as Zechariah chapter 8, and yet chapter 7 is focused exclusively on reproof and correction of the people's current sinful behaviors and attitudes.

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However, as we come to Zechariah 8 and beyond (i.e., chapters 9-14), the word of the LORD contains many promises and predictions of events future to the prophet's day. How are we to understand these predictive prophecies? How are the promises of God ultimately fulfilled? What hermeneutic (principle of interpretation) should we use?

In some cases, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy can be seen on the pages of ancient history. For example, the prophet Isaiah predicted by name that Cyrus the Persian would be used by God to restore His temple (Is. 44:28; 45:1ff.), which literally came to pass. Several prophecies in Daniel (e.g., chapters 2, 7, 8, 10-11 concern the progress of world empires from Babylon to Medo-Persia, to Greece, to Rome, all of which can be traced in history. Many prophecies regarding the Messiah were fulfilled in the first advent of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This approach to prophecy is one of *historical fulfillment*. While we can and should always seek to find prophetic fulfillment within history, especially the first advent of Messiah, there are many promises and prophecies which cannot be adequately explained as having already been fulfilled.

Some interpreters, such as Dispensationalists, seek literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. They deny the identification of the church as the continuation of Old Testament Israel, seeing these to be two separate groups or peoples of God. Therefore, they believe that prophecies of future events made to Old Testament Israel by Zechariah or other prophets (e.g., Isaiah, etc.) have to be realized within the physical, national Jewish people. If those prophecies have not yet been literally fulfilled in the past, they “hold that these promises must be physically fulfilled in the future, either in a Jewish restoration yet to come or after Christ's return when, they believe He will reign upon earth for a literal thousand years” (Phillips, p. 171). This approach of *future fulfillment* is based on an incorrect understanding of God's relationship to His covenant people and an overemphasis on a literal hermeneutic and should thus be rejected. Historical premillennialists also often look to a literal, future restoration of Israel.

On the other hand, Reformed theologians, who hold to covenant theology, see an organic link between the Old and New Testament people of God. In the Old Testament, God's people was contained within the nation of Israel; in the New Testament, God's people are the church, which is comprised of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue (cp. Rev. 5:9; 7:9). God does not have two distinct people; He has only one people, the saints of God, whether in the Old or New Testament dispensations (e.g. see Gal. 6:16).

Indeed, the church is the fulfillment of and heirs to the promises of God. “According to covenant theology, Zechariah's promises have reference to Christ's church. They are fulfilled spiritually in the age of grace through those who have entered the church. The church is the true temple in which God keeps His promise to come and dwell by His Spirit; it is in the church that God brings spiritual prosperity and to the church that even now He is bringing the nations” (Phillips, pp. 171-172).

Mackay explains how promises phrased in Old Testament language can be rightly applied to the New Testament church: “Living as they did before the coming of Christ, neither the prophet nor the people could appreciate every aspect of what would then occur. It was described to them in terms of the people of God and of their situation as known to them. But the New Testament has shown that these promises, couched in the language and perception of the Old Testament, have their true reference in the people of God from all nations” (Mackay, p. 156). Therefore, it is

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natural and right to apply the Old Testament promises and prophecies to a *spiritual fulfillment* in the church.

However, even that approach sometimes is insufficient to explain the full scope and grandeur of some of the promises and prophecies of Zechariah and the other Old Testament prophets. In those cases, complete fulfillment requires an abolition of sin and a universal institution of righteousness that can only be realized in eternity. Ultimately, we need to look to the consummation of the age and the renewal of the heavens and earth predicted in Revelation 21-22 in order to fully comprehend the magnitude of God's goodness to His people. This viewpoint sees the heavenly or *eschatological fulfillment* of God's promises and prophecies at the end of the age in the eternal state of glory. Note that "eschatology" comes from the Greek work *eschaton*, which refers to the end times or consummation of all things.

The hermeneutic, or principle of interpretation, used in this course to understand the fulfillment of promises and prophecies is a combination of the three valid viewpoints described above. First, the *historical* lens will be applied to see how the promises were fulfilled in the history of Old Testament Israel or in the advent of the Messiah. Next, the *spiritual* application of the promises and prophecies will be applied to the church and church age. Finally, the *eschatological* perspective will be viewed to encourage and prepare us for glory.

B. Covenant Promises (Zechariah 8:1-8)

God's positive answer to the question on fasting is posited in covenant language and can be seen as a form of covenant renewal. God interacts with His people on the basis of covenant. He had established His covenant with Abraham and then Moses. The center of the covenant is the promise that God would be the God of His people and dwell in their midst. God would bless them if they obeyed Him; conversely, He would bring curses upon them if they disobeyed and broke His covenant. The Babylonian exile was the ultimate curse brought upon Israel for covenant-breaking. God expelled His people from the land because of their sin. But now He has brought them back into the Promised Land and in this passage, amongst others, renews His promises of covenant blessing.

1. Covenant Love (8:1-2)

⁸*And the word of the LORD of hosts came, saying, ²"Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath.*

The jealousy of God toward His people (Zion) has previously been expressed in Zechariah's prophecy in the second Night Vision:

So the angel who talked with me said to me, "Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion" (Zechariah 1:14).

We often view jealousy as a sinful or negative emotion, because this is often the case with humans (*cp.* Pr. 6:34; 27:4; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20). However, when the Bible says that God is jealous, we should understand this to be a right and proper expression of God's fervent love toward His people. "This jealousy is a zealous ardor which God has for His people. It is because of this love that God returns with the promises that follow" (Phillips, p. 168).

Previously, in chapter 1, God's jealousy for His people was aroused against the nations because of their attitude toward Israel. God's anger had been formerly directed at the fathers of Israel

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(1:2); therefore He had raised up the nations to punish His wayward people. But those countries had enjoyed the task so thoroughly and completely that God's anger in turn had been directed toward them.

The phrase *"I am jealous for her with great wrath"* literally means "I am jealous for her with great heat." "The word 'heat' is generally used to convey the intensity of anger, but here it emphasizes the intensity of the divine commitment. There is nothing lukewarm or half-hearted about the Lord's attitude towards His people—and that should be true of the other side of the relationship as well" (Mackay, p. 155).

God's jealous love, a love that brooks no rival, was earlier provoked by the sinfulness and idolatry of Israel, which led to their captivity in Babylon. "But now this jealousy is operative for their good. It will not allow anyone or anything to disrupt His desire to see them blessed (Ez. 36:5-6; Joel 2:18; Nah. 1:2). Zechariah is assuring the disheartened people of the fundamental fact of God's disposition towards them for good, and His determination to see all that He has promised to them come true" (Mackay, p. 154).

2. Covenant Blessings (8:3-5, 7-8a)

a) *Covenant Presence (8:3)*

³*Thus says the LORD: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts, the holy mountain.*

The first covenant blessing God promises in His fervent jealousy and love for Israel is *His presence in the midst of His people*. This promise again echoes the second Night Vision of Zechariah:

Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem (Zechariah 1:16).

The prophet Ezekiel had witnessed the departure of the presence of God from the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem prior to its destruction (Ez. 9:3; 10:19; 11:22). But now God once again announces that He is returning to dwell in the midst of His people and to rebuild the city of Jerusalem in truth and holiness. In Zechariah 1, "the promise of God's return inspired the renewed effort on the temple; now that this work was moving along, God directs attentions to further blessings. The point of this promise is that the restoration of Jerusalem will be a success. God promises that He will return to the temple mount and that it will again be called the holy mountain because He will be there. There could hardly be a stronger endorsement of the temple rebuilding" (Phillips, p. 168).

The renewal of the covenant, as indicated by the returned presence of God in the midst of His people, has a profound impact on the covenant community. First, notice that *"Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city."* This phrase can also be translated "Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth." "'Truth' refers to what is certain and dependable. It is a characteristic of the LORD that He is the God of truth (Ps. 31:5), and so His word and laws that He has revealed to His people are also truth, or true (Ps. 119:30, 43, 151, 160) " (Mackay, p. 157). Due to God's presence in her midst, God's people are called faithful and true.

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Secondly, we see that God's dwelling with His people makes them holy: "*the mountain of the LORD of hosts [shall be called] the holy mountain.*" The holiness of God is one of His most sublime attributes. It means that He is separate, above, and beyond all of Creation. He is transcendent, radiant, pure, righteous, set apart from everyone and everything else. He is worthy of our love, our adoration, our worship, our obedience. He is holy holy, holy LORD God Almighty (cp. Is. 6:3). We are called to imitate God in all of His communicable attributes, including holiness: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2b; cp. 1 Pe. 1:16). We are made holy unto the LORD when we are chosen by Him, cleansed by His Holy Spirit, and set apart or consecrated for sacred service (e.g., see Ex. 19:6; Dt. 7:6; 2 Pe. 2:9).

So, the first covenant blessing God promises to His people is that of His presence, of spiritual renewal that leads to holiness and truth in the midst of the congregation. How has this promise been fulfilled? "There was a sense in which such blessing as was enjoyed by the returned community in the centuries after Zechariah's time was a partial fulfillment of these promises. But it was at best very incomplete, and we are not doing justice to the full and absolute language of Scripture if we try to restrict the fulfillment solely to those times" (Mackay, p. 157).

This promised blessing finds a natural fulfillment in the New Testament church. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers is a beautiful picture of God dwelling in the midst of His people (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). Holiness and truth are to be among the hallmarks of Christians (e.g., Rom. 12:1; Eph. 1:4; 4:24; Heb. 3:1; Phil. 4:8; 1 Jn. 3:19; 2 Jn. 4). "In the Old Testament the center for God's praise was Mount Zion. In the New Testament, Jesus brings the fulfillment of that picture. No longer is Jerusalem the center for worship, for Christ is the true temple. We now come in worship to the heavenly Zion where Jesus is. Because heaven is now the center of our worship, there can be no earthly sanctuary" (Bentley, p. 162).

Phillips applies this principle of covenant presence to our lives today: "Here we see the cause-effect relationship of spiritual blessing. God had reproved the fathers of the Jews for a lack of truthfulness. Now we find that in returning to them, God will bestow the very thing He desires.... God's presence always means moral and spiritual renewal.... We might ask how God works renewal today. The answer is found in Jesus' prayer on the night of His arrest, 'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' (John 17:17). It is therefore in the preaching and believing of His Word that God is present" (Phillips, pp. 168-169).

Although the spiritual blessings of this covenant promise belong to the church even now, the ultimate and final fulfillment will undoubtedly be in eternity, described as the holy city, the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2; cp. Heb. 12:22), where the LORD God Almighty and the Lamb (Jesus Christ) reside (Rev. 21:22), and where no false or unholy thing will ever be admitted (Rev. 21:27).

b) Covenant Peace & Prosperity (8:4-5)

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. ⁵And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.

The second covenant blessing promised by God is a beautiful picture of young and old living together in perfect harmony. This imagery is in stark contrast to the reality of Zechariah's day. Due to the distance and difficulty for exiles to travel from Babylon to Jerusalem, few elderly Jews would have been able to undertake the hazardous journey. Likewise, the dangers of

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Jerusalem, an unwalled, under-inhabited, and still mostly ruined city in the midst of many enemies, would not have been an appropriate venue for the carefree frolicking of small children.

Indeed, the portrait painted in this second covenant blessing speaks of *unparalleled peace and prosperity*. The city of Jerusalem is so safe and secure that both the oldest and youngest in society are free to relax and enjoy the benefits of covenant blessing. “There is an exquisite beauty in this picture that would strike a Jewish mind with peculiar force, to which the promise of old age and posterity was one of the richest that could be made. Indeed, the presence of the two extremes of life is one of the usual signs of prosperity. Old age and childhood not only grace a community, the one by its venerableness, and the other by its beauty, but they also prove its peace and prosperity. When war, famine, pestilence or anarchy have been raging, there are but few of either class, for their feebleness makes them the earliest victims” (Moore, p. 193).

The fulfillment of this covenant blessing cannot be seen exclusively to be in the history of ethnic Israel, for at no time has the fullest extent of this promise been realized. As with the first promise, we may more appropriately apply this covenant blessing to the church age, where spiritual peace and prosperity dwell (e.g., Rom. 5:1; 8:6; Phil. 4:7; Col. 3:15; Rom. 15:27; Eph. 1:3). However, once again, the fullest expression of covenant peace and prosperity will be experienced by both Old and New Testament believers only in eternal glory, as also prophesied by Isaiah:

⁶The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

⁹They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

¹⁷“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.

¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.

²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill out his days,
for the young man shall die a hundred years old,
and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

²¹They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²²They shall not build and another inhabit;

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- they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
- ²³They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord,
and their descendants with them.
- ²⁴Before they call I will answer;
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
- ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
and dust shall be the serpent's food.
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,”
says the Lord (Isaiah 65:17-25).

c) *Covenant Population (8:7-8a)*

⁷Thus says the LORD of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, ⁸and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.

The third covenant blessing promised by God is a *great expansion of the population of Jerusalem*. The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the resulting depopulation of Judah had left the land desolate. Even in Zechariah's day, only a relatively small number of Jews had returned out of exile to Jerusalem. The city and the land remained desperately underpopulated. This covenant blessing foresees a day in which the numerical growth of God's people will swell, as God saves people from the east and west and gathers them to Himself.

Again Zechariah seems to echo Isaiah, a prophet to an earlier generation:

¹¹In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea.

¹²He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth (Isaiah 11:11-12).

Those who look to a literal fulfillment of this prophecy in history are compelled to push it off either to modern times in the re-establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, or to a future “millennial kingdom.” This is because they do not see any Jewish refugees in the “west country” until the Diaspora following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The first destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC led to deportation to Babylon and other locations generally considered to the east of Israel. David Baron, writing in the 19th century, is a representative of this line of thought:

It is a promise which has manifestly not yet been fulfilled.... Never in the past has such a restoration taken place. A representative section, but a mere handful out of the whole people, was indeed brought back to the land after the seventy years' captivity in Babylon, of which Zechariah himself was a witness, but that could not possibly be the restoration here promised.... That partial restoration was only from one direction, namely from the east or “north” (as Babylon and Persia were called).... From the “west” they could not then have been brought back, since very few of the Jewish nation had as yet wandered westward (Baron, p. 238).

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Mackay points out a logical fallacy in this argument: “There is no need to find difficulty with the mention of the west, on the grounds that the people had been exiled to Babylon and Mesopotamia, which would be covered by the mention of east. Many had in fact gone to Egypt (2 Kgs. 33:34; Jer. 43:7; 44:15)” (Mackay, p. 160), which would have been to the south and west of Israel. Still, as we have already seen with the first two covenant promises, the fulfillment is not intended to be primarily a physical restoration of the Jewish people.

Rather, we should understand “east” and “west” as a hendiadys, a figure of speech in which polar opposites are cited to indicate the entirety or full scope of the statement. This is the clear meaning of this well-known verse regarding the complete extent of God’s forgiving mercy:

As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:12).

Thus, when Zechariah speaks of the “east country” and the “west country,” we should understand this as a figure of speech meaning the whole world, from which the entire dispersion of God’s people is gathered (similar to the metaphor of “the four corners of the earth” in Is. 11:12). After all, God is in the business of saving people from every part of the earth:

²Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble

³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south (Psalm 107:2-3).

Once again, we have here in Zechariah a promise which foretells the great expansion of the kingdom of God in and during the church age. The expansion of the church to the nations of the world is a fulfillment of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20) and was the particular call and ministry of the apostle Paul (Acts 9:15; 22:21; Gal. 2:7-8). Even now, the church’s mission involves the ingathering of the nations into the kingdom of God. It is in this way that “many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 8:11).

The apostle John recorded the final consummation of this prophecy when he saw saints from every tribe and language and people and nation among those in heaven who were saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, clothed in white to represent their righteousness, and worshiped the Lamb forever (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

3. Covenant Keeper (8:6, 8b)

a) *God Is Mighty (8:6)*

⁶Thus says the LORD of hosts: If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvelous in my sight, declares the LORD of hosts?

In light of these great and glorious blessings, it would be natural to be a bit incredulous. How can these promises ever be fulfilled? This is the sense of the question in verse 6. While God does not consider these promises too hard to keep, since “with God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26; cp. Mk. 10:27; Lk. 18:27), they seem so “marvelous” as to be altogether impossible to believe. “Two similar verses (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:25) record incredulity in the face of marvelous promises. It is as difficult to believe the promises as it is to take seriously the threats of judgment” (Baldwin, p. 150). The challenge, for God’s people of every generation, therefore, is to believe the promises of God:

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God's promises always call for faith in response. This is the point of verse 6, where God challenges the people of Jerusalem to believe these extravagant claims. In the midst of these promises to bless comes a challenge to trust in God by believing his Word. It is hard for us to believe God's promises, because they involve far more than could naturally be achieved... He has made great promises, and He acknowledges that they may seem marvelous—that is to say, impossible—to the Jews, but only if they are thinking according to human standards. If they would only think about what God can do, instead of what man can do, then they would be eager to believe (Phillips, pp. 172-173).

Chapter 8 contains a constant refrain: "Thus says the LORD of hosts." This introductory phrase is used six times in our passage (8:2, 3, 4, 6, 9), while the title itself is used a total of 17 times in Zechariah 8 alone. As the LORD of hosts, God has all the legions of the heavenly angels at His beck and call to carry out and enforce His will. It is a title of supreme power and capability, which is rendered in some translations as "LORD Almighty." Why is this title of God used so often by Zechariah? Baron answers:

The object and reason for it is to strengthen our faith, and to assure us at the very outset that, however incredible from a natural or human point of view the fulfillment of these things may be, they will most *certainly* come to pass, because the Name of the infinite, eternal, and faithful Jehovah, with whom nothing is too hard or impossible, stands pledged to their accomplishment. Let us bear this in mind as we proceed, and not stagger at the promises of God through unbelief, saying, as many, alas, do say, "How is it possible?" (Baron, p. 230).

Not only is God able to make marvelous covenant promises, but He is also able, willing, and committed to keeping them. He is the Covenant Keeping God. Rather than ask with the skeptic – can God actually do it? – God's prophet has encouraged us, by repeatedly emphasizing God's mighty power, so that we can rather say in faith with the Psalmist:

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes (Psalm 118:23).

b) *God Is Faithful (8:8b)*

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness."

The mighty power of God is one reason to encourage God's people to believe that He will keep His covenant promises. But the second half of verse 8 offers us another reason to trust in our covenant-keeping God. Zechariah repeats the "Immanuel Principle," the statement at the core of God's covenant with His people: "*And they shall be My people, and I will be their God.*" This promise is repeated throughout Scripture (e.g., Ex. 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:33; 32:38; Ez. 37:27; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 21:3), and is a summary of all the covenant promises we've already seen.

But here in Zechariah 8, there is an addendum: "*in faithfulness and in righteousness.*" Here is another motivation to have confidence in our covenant God. "Surely this was meant as a reason to believe and trust. God is ever faithful; it is His very nature to be true to His Word. The same is true of His righteousness. God must ever be acquitted in His own court, and therefore we find our confidence in Him" (Phillips, p. 174).

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c) God Keeps His Promises

The Lord has made marvelous promises to His people: 1) the covenant presence of God; 2) covenant peace & prosperity; and 3) a population explosion of the covenant community. The promises are currently being fulfilled in the church, and they will ultimately be consummated in the new heavens and new earth.

But God does not just give us wonderful covenant promises; He also provides the encouragement to us so that our faith is strengthened to believe them as we wait for their fulfillment. In this passage, we have at least two motivations to believe that what God has said will come to pass: 1) our Lord God mighty and powerful; and 2) He is faithful and true (cp. Rev. 3:14; 19:11). He will keep His promises because to do any less would be to deny that He is God. “These are great reasons for us to believe. God is sovereign and almighty, able to do all that He says. God has made great promises to us in His Word. And these promises are sealed by His own faithful nature and the necessity that He be found righteous in all that He does. Notice that all these reasons have to do with the character of God. Strong faith is found not by looking to ourselves but looking to Him, and finding there a God we can trust, whose promises ought to be precious to every believer” (Phillips, p. 175). We can have confidence that God keeps His promises, and this should strengthen our faith while we await their consummation.

C. Covenant Response (Zechariah 8:9-13)

Having declared the great covenant blessings of God and given us reasons to trust in their fulfillment, Zechariah now returns to the immediate present situation of his original audience, the post-exilic community that was called to rebuild the temple. In verse 9-13, Zechariah exhorts his listeners to fulfill their calling in light of God’s covenant grace and mercy.

1. The Past (8:9-10)

⁹Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Let your hands be strong, you who in these days have been hearing these words from the mouth of the prophets who were present on the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built. ¹⁰For before those days there was no wage for man or any wage for beast, neither was there any safety from the foe for him who went out or came in, for I set every man against his neighbor.

After looking down the tunnel of history to the ultimate consummation of the promised blessings of God to His covenant people, Zechariah calls upon his own generation to continue their work in building the temple of the LORD. He was speaking to those who had been present, eighteen years earlier in 536 BC, when the foundation of the temple had first been laid. But that work soon halted, under growing opposition by enemies (cp. Ezra 4:4-24) and the encroachment of worldly cares and concerns (cp. Hag. 1:4). For sixteen long years the work had laid dormant, and the people had paid a stiff price. While the temple laid in ruins, the prophet reminded them in verse 10 that they suffered economic hardship, external disruption, and internal dissension. Zechariah’s contemporary, Haggai, summarized their situation in similar words:

You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes (Haggai 1:6).

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But then God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to exhort the people of God to redirect their energies into completing the work of temple reconstruction, which was their first and highest priority. The post-exilic community heard the word of the LORD *from the mouth of the prophets* and responded appropriately. Two years had gone by and the work was progressing well. But we all need more encouragement, even when we have returned to the right path once more, and so Zechariah exhorts his listeners: “*Let your hands be strong.*” “The idiom *let your hands be strong*, often used as an exhortation to fight (Jdg. 7:11; 2 Sam. 2:7; 16:21), here indicates that courage is needed to undertake some demanding task, or rather, continue it until it is finished. Haggai’s corresponding expression is ‘be strong’ (Hag. 2:4)” (Baldwin, p. 151). Zechariah’s message here is simple: don’t fall back; keep up the work; build the temple.

2. The Present and Future (8:11-13)

¹¹*But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the LORD of hosts. ¹²For there shall be a sowing of peace. The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew. And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. ¹³And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong.”*

“*But now,*” declares the LORD of Hosts. What a glorious change in affairs is presaged by this simple phrase! In “*the former days*” there was scarcity and want; “*but now*” the blessings of God will flow through covenant renewal. The second covenant blessing of peace and prosperity from verses 4-5 is especially highlighted here, albeit in different terms. The picture of agricultural well-being described in verse 12 would have resonated with post-exilic Israel. In particular, the “*sowing of peace*” or *shalom* recalls a similar prophecy from Ezekiel:

²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. ²⁶And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. ²⁷And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land (Ezekiel 34:25-27a).

These words are a clear reversal of fortune and a sign of God’s forward favor and blessing. The prophet Haggai used similar terms of agricultural bounty to signify covenant renewal:

¹⁸Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid, consider: ¹⁹Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you (Haggai 2:18-19).

God was changing their *cursing* once again into *blessing*. “This is salvation by grace; everything we read here speaks of God’s gracious initiative. But it is also through faith, for God clearly expects a believing and obedience. Therefore he says: ‘*Fear not, but let your hands be strong*’ (8:13). This is a call to a faithful and bold service to the Lord, always based on the promises of God (1 Sam. 23:16-17). It is grace that produces faith; God’s promises remove our fear and strengthen our resolve” (Phillips, p. 177).

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Conclusion and Application

The Exodus is an archetype of God's dealings with His covenant people. First, God delivered Israel from the darkness of slavery in Egypt through the mighty power of His outstretched arm. This salvation was only due to God's sovereign grace, mercy, and love, not because of some inherent worth in the Israelites themselves:

⁶For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations (Deuteronomy 7:6-9).

Following that marvelous salvation, God then called His people to be faithful to the Deliverer and to keep His holy and righteous Law at Mt. Sinai. This pattern – grace then law – is the model for our salvation as well. God delivers His people from slavery to sin and death and restores them to His image in truth and righteousness. Because we have been saved by grace, we are then called in humble thanksgiving to serve our Lord through good works (cp. Eph. 2:8-10). This is the gospel message: grace then law; salvation then obedience; faith then works; justification then sanctification.

And this pattern is repeated for us once again in Zechariah chapter 8. In verses 1-8 we have God's great covenant blessings: promises of His presence, of peace & prosperity, of population growth in the kingdom of God. This is pure grace. Having stated the blessings, along with assurances that He is powerful and faithful to keep those promises, He calls upon His people in vv. 9-13 to follow through in obedience to their calling.

Trusting in the promises and the Promise Keeper, we are to act upon that faith. *Fear not, but let your hands be strong.* Do the work that you are meant to do. For the post-exilic generation, that meant completing the construction of the temple. But what does it mean for us? We are still called to build the temple of the Lord, only the temple of the New Testament is no longer a building, but a community of believers (cp. 2 Pe. 2:4-5). We are to be about faithful works of obedience: of worship, of witness, of love toward our neighbor, of fidelity toward our Savior. And ultimately, both Old and New Testament saints will enjoy the covenant blessings of His presence, peace & prosperity, and expansion in glory forever.

That is the lesson of Zechariah 8:1-13: *Because God is all powerful and faithful, He keeps the promises He has made to His covenant people; therefore, we must respond in obedience while looking forward in faith to their full consummation.*

For next time: Read Zechariah 8:14-23.