

## XXI. Strength through the LORD

April 26, 2020          Zechariah 12:1-9

**Theme:** Throughout the church age, God protects His people against all enemies and gives even the weakest Christian strength to persevere until the end.

**Aim:** To rely on the LORD for spiritual strength to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil and to persevere until the end.

**Key Verse:** <sup>5</sup>Then the clans of Judah shall say to themselves, “The inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through the LORD of hosts, their God” (Zechariah 12: 5).

### *Review*

Last week, we looked at Zechariah 11:1-17. This passage is an extended enacted prophecy that anticipates the disaster that overtook Jerusalem in 70 AD. Zechariah was commanded to *shepherd the flock doomed for slaughter*. Despite the loving care of the Good Shepherd, the people of Israel rejected their Messiah. As a result, the LORD removed His pity, mercy, and compassion from them. Zechariah broke his first staff, *Favor*, indicating that God’s protective favor over Israel, which prevented the nations from overrunning the land, had been removed. The breaking of the second staff, *Union*, threw the Jews into confusion and caused bitter factions and infighting that weakened them against the Romans.

The final straw came when the wages for the Good’s Shepherd’s tender care were weighed out. Instead of repentance, faith, obedience, good works, and worship, they gave Him a contemptuous thirty pieces of silver, equating His service to the worth of a dead slave. This prophecy was completely fulfilled in the betrayal of Jesus Christ by Judas Iscariot—the thirty pieces of silver, the tossing of the blood money down in the temple, and the ultimate disposition of the wages to the potter—exactly as foreordained by the LORD.

The judgment against the Jews for their rejection of Messiah came quickly and harshly. After the Zealot’s slaughtered the Roman garrison in Jerusalem in 66 AD, Vespasian and Titus advanced with their legions to besiege Jerusalem. The suffering was intense, as factional infighting amongst the Jews led to poor decisions and mass starvation. In the providence of God, the community of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem was able to escape the siege and settle across the Jordan in the mountains of Pella. But there was no relief for the Jewish masses. In 70 AD, Titus breached the city walls, destroyed the temple, fired the city, and deported the survivors into slavery. Ultimately, some 1.5 million Jews lost their lives in this futile conflict that was foreordained and prophesied over 500 years before in the pages of the Old Testament. The lesson of Zechariah chapter 11 can be summarized as: *Rejection of the Messiah, the Good Shepherd of Israel, results in devastating judgment and destruction for unbelievers, although He will preserve His remnant.*

### *Introduction*

The city of Rome was sacked by the barbarian Visigoths in 410 AD. Although Rome was no longer the capital of the western Roman empire at that time, still shock of its fall reverberated throughout the Mediterranean world. Many Romans felt that this was a just punishment decreed by their traditional gods for abandoning them in favor of the new state religion of Christianity.

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In response, the greatest theologian of the first millennium of the church, Augustine of Hippo, wrote his seminal work, *De civitate Dei contra paganos*—“on the city of God against the pagans.”

In *The City of God*, Augustine argued that Christianity was not to blame for the sack of Rome. Indeed, Christianity is superior to all other pagan religions or philosophies. Augustine describes the conflict between the earthly city (the City of Man), with the heavenly city, the City of God. The work is divided into twenty-two books; the first ten are a polemic against the fall of Rome, which is pictured as the City of Man; and the last twelve books trace the origins, histories, and destinies of the two cities, in which the City of God is victorious:

The city of God we speak of is the same to which testimony is borne by that Scripture, which excels all the writings of all nations by its divine authority, and has brought under its influence all kinds of minds, and this not by a casual intellectual movement, but obviously by an express providential arrangement. For there it is written, “Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (Ps. 87:3). And in another psalm we read, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness, increasing the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:1). And, a little after, in the same psalm, “As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God. God has established it forever” (Ps. 48:8). And in another, “There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of our God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved” (Ps. 46:4-5a). From these and similar testimonies, all of which it were tedious to cite, we have learned that there is a city of God, and its Founder has inspired us with a love which makes us covet its citizenship. To this Founder of the holy city the citizens of the earthly city prefer their own gods, not knowing that He is the God of gods (Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.1).

In his treatise, Augustine draws forth the principle that the physical city of Jerusalem is a symbol or type foreshadowing the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God. This conclusion is drawn naturally from the words of the Apostle Paul:

<sup>22</sup>For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. <sup>23</sup>But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. <sup>24</sup>Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. <sup>25</sup>Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. <sup>26</sup>But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. <sup>27</sup>For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” <sup>28</sup>Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. <sup>29</sup>But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. <sup>30</sup>But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” <sup>31</sup>So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman (Galatians 4:22-31).

Here is Augustine’s commentary on the above passage of Scripture:

There was indeed on earth, so long as it was needed, a symbol and foreshadowing image of this city, which served the purpose of reminding men that such a city was to be, rather

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than of making it present; and this image was itself called the holy city, as a symbol of the future city, though not itself the reality.... This interpretation of the passage, handed down to us with apostolic authority, shows how we ought to understand the Scriptures of the two covenants—the old and the new. One portion of the earthly city became an image of the heavenly city, not having a significance of its own, but signifying another city, and therefore serving, or “being in bondage.” For it was founded not for its own sake, but to prefigure another city; and this shadow of a city was also itself foreshadowed by another preceding figure. For Sarah's handmaid Hagar, and her son, were an image of this image. And as the shadows were to pass away when the full light came, Sarah, the free woman, who prefigured the free city (which again was also prefigured in another way by that shadow of a city Jerusalem), therefore said, “Cast out the bond woman and her son; for the son of the bond woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac,” or, as the apostle says, “with the son of the free woman.” In the earthly city, then, we find two things—its own obvious presence, and its symbolic presentation of the heavenly city. Now citizens are begotten to the earthly city by nature vitiated by sin, but to the heavenly city by grace freeing nature from sin (Augustine, *The City of God*, XV.2).

The same principle, namely that the ultimate destiny of the people of God is to reside in the holy city of heavenly Jerusalem, rather than in the earthly version, is supported in the New Testament:

<sup>18</sup>For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup>For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” <sup>21</sup>Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” <sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, <sup>23</sup>and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup>and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:18-24).

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Revelation 21:1-2).

As we come to the twelfth chapter of Zechariah today, Augustine's contribution of *The City of God* to Christian theology will help us to understand the prophet's message. The passage describes (yet another) siege of Jerusalem, which is surrounded by enemies from all the nations. However, there are no contextual clues in the passage to help us place this event into a historical context. Indeed, unlike the historical fulfillments we have seen in chapter 9-11, there has not been any literal fulfillment of this prophecy yet. This drives us to conclude either that an earthly, physical fulfillment is yet in our future, or that the primary meaning of this passage is spiritual and heavenly in nature. Following Augustine's lead, it is preferable to think of Zechariah's description of an attack on Jerusalem as the ongoing conflict between the City of Man and the City of God. Thus, the theme of Zechariah 12:1-9 can be summarized as: *Throughout the church age, God protects His people against all enemies and gives even the weakest Christian strength to persevere until the end.*

## **A. The LORD Saves the Church**

### **1. Chapters 12-14**

Before we can dive into Zechariah 12:1-9, we first must discuss a few housekeeping matters. The first concerns the literary structure of Zechariah. As previously discussed, Zechariah falls into two main halves, chapters 1-6 and 9-14, with a hinge in chapters 7-8. While the prophecies of the first 8 chapters are all dated (to 520 or 518 BC), the latter portion of the book is undated, but likely written much later than the previous chapters. Instead, it is composed of two “oracles” or “burdens”; the first comprising chapters 9-11, and the second contained in chapters 12-14.

The first Burden was “on the land of Hadrach...,” a Gentile location. As we have seen in our studies, the prophecies in this section contained a future history of God’s dealings with the covenant nation up until the coming and rejection of the Messiah. Chapters 9-11 were full of messianic predictions that were fulfilled in the first advent of Jesus Christ. The second Burden is “concerning Israel,” and seems to pick up where the previous section left off, containing additional messianic prophecies, and carrying forward the progress of His people in the church age until the consummation.

### **2. “On That Day”**

One of the key distinctive features that unifies the final three chapters of Zechariah is the repetition of the phrase “on that day.” This expression occurs five times in our passage (12:1-9) and a total of sixteen times in chapters 12-14. Many of the Old Testament prophets use similar words, such as “the day of the LORD” (Is. 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ez. 30:3; Joel 2:1, 11; 2:31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Ob. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5). In its broadest meaning “that day” or “the day of the LORD” refers to a time of visitation by God, when He draws near in evaluation. That evaluation often results in judgment for the wicked and salvation for the righteous, both to the glory of His name. It certainly can refer to the end times, when Christ returns again, not in humiliation, but in glory, to judge the nations and inaugurate eternity. This is the primary meaning of the phrase in the New Testament (cp. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Th. 5:2; 2 Th. 2:2; 2 Pe. 2:10). However, in the only other usage of these words in the New Testament, Acts 2:20 (quoting Joel 2:31), the apostle Peter proclaims that Joel’s prophecy concerning “the day of the LORD” was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16), not in the second advent of Christ. Therefore, those interpreters who “force” every instance of this kind of eschatological phrase to fulfillment in the end times may be reading more into the text than is warranted.

Therefore, it is safest to understand Zechariah’s use of “on that day” in the manner explained by Phillips:

The general statement we can make about “the day of the LORD” is that it refers to the coming of God’s judging and saving rule upon the earth. Such a day occurs at various times in redemptive history. The phrase “on that day,” therefore, refers not so much to a date marked on the calendar, but to each of the many visitations of God reported in Scripture, always with manifestations of power, holiness, and grace (Phillips, p. 257).

Mackay explains that “‘The day of the LORD’ is not primarily eschatological, but points to a time when God intervenes significantly to re-order affairs on earth in a way that corresponds to what He wants. That may take place through temporal judgments on Babylon (Is. 13:9) or Jerusalem (Lam. 2:22), or it may relate to the more distant, final judgment of God” (Mackay, p. 227). With

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this understanding, we can see that many of the historical events we've already touched in our study of Zechariah would fall under the umbrella of "days of the LORD," including the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC by Babylon, the destruction of Tyre and Gaza in 332 BC by Alexander the Great (including his sparing of Jerusalem), the defeat of the Seleucids under Antiochus IV Epiphanes by the Maccabees in 166-164 BC, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

### 3. Principle of Interpretation

So, how should we understand Zechariah's use of "on that day" in chapters 12-14 of his book? In other words, who and what are his prophecies about? There are two general schools of thought. Those who hold to a literal hermeneutic of interpretation apply these passages to physical, national Israel. And to the extent that they have not yet been fulfilled in the Jewish commonwealth yet, they are pushed forward to our future, typically to the end times immediately preceding the return of Christ. Thus, they see a restoration of national Israel, a physical war of the nations against Jerusalem, supernatural deliverance, national repentance of the Jews, and the return of Christ on earth to reign over a Jewish kingdom in the millennium. Boice is an advocate of this position. Indeed, he sees Zechariah chapter 12 as the most "specifically Jewish prophecy in the book":

If these chapters refer to Jews specifically and not to the church as the New Testament Israel, then the events to which they refer must be future, For it is certain that there has not yet been a national repentance by Israel nor an enjoyment by them of the blessings here enumerated. And if this is the case, then the battle referred to in Zechariah 12:1-9 must be the last great battle, Armageddon, and the repentance of verses 10-14 a time of national salvation prior to the second coming of the Lord. Indeed, when the chapters are viewed in that light, the repeated "on that day" is seen quite naturally to refer to that last and great day of the Lord's return in judgment. These chapters are a prophecy of the events of those end times (Boice, p. 208).

The other main interpretive approach, the Reformed view, holds that there is a continuity between the people of God throughout the ages. In the Old Testament, they are known as the nation of Israel, while in the New Testament, they are the church of Jesus Christ. Christians in the church age are heir to all the promises and blessings given by God to the children of Israel. If we realize that the prophets were limited by the religious language available to them in their day, then it is not a stretch at all to interpret them in terms of their New Testament realities instead of their Old Testament types. Thus, as we read the prophecies of the Old Testament, we should seek to understand them in the light of the gospel, applying the same principles that Augustine set forth in *The City of God*:

Those who see this chapter as speaking of the church will find its fulfillment taking place all through the current age of grace.... All through Zechariah, we have noted a focus on a spiritual fulfillment in the Christian church, and that is the best way to take this oracle as well. These prophecies refer to the people of God generally, who in Zechariah's day were located in Jerusalem, but who are now found in the Christian church.... The church is indeed besieged by the world, and... passages like this in Zechariah very well anticipate both our need and God's faithfulness in upholding His people. It is my view, then, that in conformity with the general Reformed view, that this prophecy speaks of God's mighty

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provision for the salvation of His people in every age, and especially for the church in its stand against a hostile world (Phillips, pp. 257-258).

It is somewhat ironic that chapter 11, the enacted parable of the Good Shepherd's rejection, which culminates in God's rejection of the Jewish nation and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 AD, is immediately followed by chapter 12, in which Jerusalem is preserved against the combined enmity of the nations by the active intervention of the LORD. This incongruous juxtaposition should give us some hint that Zechariah is here speaking of a spiritual city, a heavenly city, the City of God, rather than an earthly city. The primary subject of Zechariah 12:1-9, and indeed, of the last three chapters of this book, is how the LORD saves the church of Jesus Christ. In the present passage, we see this salvation in two different ways: first, God stuns the nations so that their efforts to destroy the church fail (12:1-4); and secondly, the LORD strengthens His people and ensures their victory (12:5-9).

### B. The LORD Stuns the Nations (Zechariah 12:1-4)

#### 1. The LORD (12:1)

*<sup>12</sup>The oracle of the word of the LORD concerning Israel: Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him:*

The Hebrew word *massa* means "oracle" or "burden." It typically foreshadows an ominous or threatening prophecy of judgment. This oracle concerns "Israel," that is, the people of God, whether in the Jewish nation or the New Testament church. In what way is the prophecy of chapters 12-14 a "burden" concerning Israel, since, this section of Scripture is full of wonderful promises of deliverance and salvation for God's people? "This oracle is a burden on Israel not because God will bring woe upon her, but because of the circumstances God's people must endure for their deliverance. In these passages God's city is brought under fierce attack and placed under siege, and though she is delivered, this is a burden to be borne" (Phillips, p. 256).

Before getting into the content of the oracle, the LORD first declares His sovereignty over all of creation and mankind: *Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him.* God makes three declarations in this introduction. First, He *stretched out the heavens*. He is the Creator of the heavenly realms, including the sun, moon, and stars. He ordered them in their arrays and established them in the sky. Second, He *founded the earth*; He is also the Creator of our world and everything it contains. This is a declaration to us of His power and might, a reminder that He also gave to His servant Job:

<sup>4</sup>Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

<sup>5</sup>Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

<sup>6</sup>On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone,

<sup>7</sup>when the morning stars sang together

and all the sons of God shouted for joy? ...

<sup>31</sup>Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades

or loose the cords of Orion?

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<sup>32</sup>Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,  
or can you guide the Bear with its children?

<sup>33</sup>Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?

Can you establish their rule on the earth? (Job 38:4-7, 31-33).

But God is not just the Creator of the heavens and the earth, in the third place He also *formed the spirit of man within him* by breathing life into mankind (Gen. 2:7). We owe Him our allegiance because He is our Creator, our Lord.

In the original Hebrew, the three key verbs—*stretched*, *founded*, and *formed*—are participles, indicating continuous, ongoing action, i.e., He “is stretching” the heavens, He “is founding” the earth, and He “is forming” the spirit of man. As the commentators like to point out, we do not have a clockwork God like the deists, who wound up creation, set it into motion, and then stepped back to watch how it would all unfold. Rather, we have a God who is active in creation, which is manifested in His providence.

WCF SC Q&A 11 says that “God’s works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.” Our God is powerful *and* active; He ordains all things and ensures they come to pass in the course of redemptive history. This is the God who speaks the oracle that follows. As an oracle, it may contain hard providences, but we can be assured that His sovereign control of events which He reveals to us cannot be thwarted by the concerted efforts of rebellious mankind or by Satan and all his minions, for “the gates of hell shall not prevail against” His church (Mt. 16:18).

What a great comfort it is to know that the Lord God of all Creation has the power and authority to protect and deliver His people! Therefore, we can lift our voices up with the Psalmist:

<sup>1</sup>I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

<sup>2</sup>My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth (Psalm 121:1-2).

### 2. Stuns the Nations (12:2-4)

In 1874, Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky wrote his most famous piano work, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It is a suite of ten pieces, plus a recurring promenade theme, that is based on ten paintings by his good friend, Russian artist Victor Hartmann. Each composition was written to evoke the imagery of the associated picture: my two favorites are the “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks” and “The Grand Gates of Kiev.”

Zechariah does something similar here, painting three word pictures showing God’s sovereign control of the nations. In modern parlance, it is like a PowerPoint slideshow. The common thread is a siege of the city of Jerusalem, invested by all of the surrounding nations. The armies of the combined enemies seem poised to overwhelm the beleaguered defenders. Their rage is directed not only at the people of Jerusalem, but more particularly at Jerusalem’s God:

<sup>1</sup>Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?

<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,

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<sup>3</sup>“Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us” (Psalm 2:1-3).

### a) *A Cup of Staggering* (12:2)

<sup>2</sup>“Behold, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples. The siege of Jerusalem will also be against Judah.

The first picture in Zechariah’s slideshow is *a cup of staggering*. “The ‘cup’ symbolized the life experience which God purposed for man. This might be a ‘cup of salvation’ (Ps. 116:13), a cup overflowing with blessing (Ps. 23:5), but more often, in view of man’s perverse unbelief, it had to be a cup of the Lord’s wrath” (Baldwin, p. 188). In some cases, because of their disobedience, God called upon His own people to drink the cup of His judicial wrath (e.g., Is. 51:17; Ez. 23:32-34). In other instances, the nations are called to drink that cup of staggering:

<sup>15</sup>Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. <sup>16</sup>They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them” (Jeremiah 25:15-16; cp. Ps. 75:8; Rev. 14:10; 16:19).

In Zechariah’s portrait, the Hebrew word translated “cup” is actually a “bowl” or a “basin.” In other words, it is a vessel large enough from which *all the surrounding peoples* may drink. The strong wine of God’s wrath causes the nations to stumble around intoxicated, unable to think clearly or take effective action against the city of Jerusalem. By confusing His enemies, God protects His people.

The last sentence in v. 2, *the siege of Jerusalem will also be against Judah*, has caused some confusion amongst commentators. Some have seen it as a statement of opposition between the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah, that Judah had joined in with the other enemies of Jerusalem. For example, Baldwin writes: “Judah was opposing Jerusalem, either by choice or by the compulsion of the enemy’s superior strength” (Baldwin, p. 189). However, I believe that the true sense is rather that both the city of Jerusalem and the countryside of Judah are united in being beset upon by the enemies of God. As we will see, these two designations continue to be used throughout this passage for God’s people. The likely difference is that Jerusalem, as a walled city, is more secure and easily defensible as compared to the farms, villages, and small open towns of the land, which are more vulnerable to attack. “The emphasis then is not that part, but the whole, of the people of God are going to experience this time of persecution” (Mackay, p. 230).

### b) *A Heavy Stone of Injury* (12:3)

<sup>3</sup>*On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples. All who lift it will surely hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will gather against it.*

Slide number two in this exhibition is of *a heavy stone*. The idea here is of a large rock unearthed in a field by a farmer. In attempting to move this huge boulder out of the way so that he can plow his land and sow crops, he is injured, perhaps by throwing out his back, or maybe by having the stone slip and fall, crushing his foot or leg.

St. Jerome was a contemporary of Augustine, most famous for the *Vulgate*, the translation of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments into Latin. In commenting upon this verse, Jerome stated that “it was a custom among the cities of Palestine to have a large rock, the lifting of

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which was a test of strength, and that he himself saw in the Acropolis at Athens a huge sphere of brass, which was used for the same purpose; no athlete being allowed to enter the games who was unable to lift it. Jerusalem has literally been such a stone, and the Church of God pre-eminently has been a test of this kind, to all who have attempted to use her for selfish purposes” (Moore, pp. 271-272).

The third-century BC Greek mathematician, Archimedes, famously said, “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” Unfortunately (for them), the nations of the world have neither sufficient lever nor fulcrum with which to move the immovable object that is the church of Jesus Christ. The City of God shall not be moved:

<sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.

<sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved (Ps. 46:4-5a).

c) *Panicked Horse and Rider (12:4)*

<sup>4</sup>*On that day, declares the LORD, I will strike every horse with panic, and its rider with madness. But for the sake of the house of Judah I will keep my eyes open, when I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness.*

The third and final picture in Zechariah’s exhibition is of a panicked horse and rider: *I will strike every horse with panic, and its rider with madness.* The massed army in front of the walls of Jerusalem is poised to overwhelm the city. The cavalry, which represents the strongest and most fearsome of the ancient forces, begins its charge. Nothing, it seems, can stand in the way or resist this onslaught of raw military force. But unexpectedly, the advance falters, and the mounted troops fall out of formation. Panic, madness, and blindness have struck the enemy, and in their bewilderment, they begin fighting and killing one another. Their line falls back away from the city walls in confusion, disarray, and defeat.

Zechariah’s older colleague, Haggai, had made a similar prophecy:

<sup>21</sup>“Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, <sup>22</sup>and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother (Haggai 2:21-22).

The only other verse in the Old Testament where this same list of maladies—*panic* (or “confusion”), *madness*, and *blindness*—is in the list of curses which would befall the nation of Israel if they forsook their covenant with God: “The LORD will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind” (Dt. 28:28). The covenant curses, which God had heretofore reserved for Israel when she failed in her covenant responsibilities, are now seen to plague those who attack “the apple of His eye” (Zech. 2:8).

There are two key takeaways from Zechariah’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” First, notice the intensification of imagery in moving from verse 2 to 4. The enemies of God in v. 2, which are “the surrounding peoples,” that is, the nation states in the immediate vicinity of Judah, grow to “all the peoples” and “all the nations of the earth” in verse 3. In verse 4, God’s actions are not simply against nations, but against all the individuals in those nations—*every horse...and its rider*. The action that God takes in verse 2 is to confuse His enemies via a “cup of staggering.” While this may frustrate their goals and bruise their egos, they remain relatively intact. In verse

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3, those hostile to God's people who persist in their enmity "will surely hurt themselves," sustaining injury and harm. Verse 4 leads to dangerous and destructive madness. Eventually, when we get to verse 9, God *will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem*. "There is an increasing intensity, a progressive judgment of those who persist against the Lord; they end up in utter destruction" (Phillips, p. 260).

In the second place, notice how God's people are protected from their enemies. What do they do in their defense? Nothing! It is God who acts on behalf of the His people. It is He who makes Jerusalem a *cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples*. It is God who transforms the church into a *heavy stone for all the peoples*. And it is the Lord who drives the nations into confusion, madness, and blindness. It is all of God's gracious sovereignty and providence, not of us. This is effectively portrayed in v. 4 when God says, *But for the sake of the house of Judah I will keep my eyes open*. The enemies of God descend into blindness, but God always keeps His eyes open to protect the City of God.

Yes, it is true that the nations rage and plot vain things against the church that Jesus Christ gave His life to save. But even more importantly, it is true that the enemies of God cannot prevail against the Lord and His Anointed. In fact, the idea is so ludicrous, the futility of the nations' efforts in Zechariah's exhibition so absurd, that the Creator and Sustainer of all things sits back and laughs:

<sup>4</sup>He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.

<sup>5</sup>Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

<sup>6</sup>"As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill" (Psalm 2:4-6).

### C. The LORD Strengthens His People (12:5-9)

#### 1. Strength (12:5-6)

##### a) *The People (12:5)*

<sup>5</sup>*Then the clans of Judah shall say to themselves, 'The inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through the LORD of hosts, their God.'*

In verses 2-4, Zechariah's exhibition of three pictures displayed the church's enemies being confounded by the LORD in their attempt to besiege the City of God. In verses 5-9, the focus shifts within the walls and to His strengthening of the inhabitants of the holy city.

The Hebrew word translated by the ESV as *clans* in verses 5 and 6 can also be translated as "leaders" or "governors." So, the subject of verse 5 is most likely the leaders of the congregation of Israel. *To themselves* is a paraphrase of the more literal Hebrew, "in their hearts." In Jewish thought, the heart is the seat of the soul, the person, the inner man. That is why the one who says in his heart, "There is no God," is a fool (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). It is utterly foolish and ruinous to believe there is no God and then to live a lifestyle commensurate with that philosophy. Indeed, that is the very ethic that the nations encamped around the city of Jerusalem embrace.

However, when the leaders of Judah speak within their own hearts, they are clearly not fools; they are expressing their true inner thoughts or convictions based on all the evidence they have at

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their disposal to make a true and right evaluation. They have seen the cup of staggering, the heavy stone, and the panicked horses and riders. They know the truth of the situation, that *the inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through the LORD of hosts, their God*. The LORD has made His people strong, even in the midst of their obvious weakness compared to the forces of darkness in opposition to them. This is a cause for rejoicing, and that is exactly what these leaders of Judah are doing. The apostle Paul echoes this exact sentiment, when he relays how God refused his prayer to remove his “thorn in the flesh”:

<sup>9</sup>But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Phillips adds, by way of application:

This is something that faithful pastors always long to see: the whole church strengthened by the presence of the Lord. This also speaks of the confidence we ought to have about all who have truly come in faith: since the Lord Almighty is their God, they shall surely grow in spiritual strength (Phillips, p. 262).

b) *The Leaders (12:6)*

<sup>6</sup>“On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves. And they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples, while Jerusalem shall again be inhabited in its place, in Jerusalem.

The strengthening of individual Christians has a synergistic effect of also emboldening church leaders. Zechariah paints another picture here to add to his exhibition, of a *blazing pot* or brazier setting fire to a woodpile, and a *flaming torch* igniting sheaves of dried grain or kindling. The flames spread like wildfire, burning up the surrounding nations but sparing the City of God.

As we have seen in our previous studies of Zechariah (9:5-7), God defeats His enemies either through righteous condemnation or gracious conversion. I believe that this image of the blazing fire is a portrait of the global spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and bringing the nations in submission to Him. The brightness (i.e., fervor and ardor) of the church’s leaders for the truth of God’s Word is in direct proportion to their impact on the world around them.

The apostle Paul and his missionary team had a seismic impact on the nations. Even their opponents recognized that they “turned the world upside down” in their preaching of “another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6, 7). “This is what the church needs, blazing pastors who stand firm against the world in reliance on God, spreading His Word like fire. Indeed, wherever the church stands boldly against the world there are men of God who stand strong in faith, and on the example of such courage the whole of the church greatly depends” (Phillips, p. 263).

### 2. Salvation (12:7)

<sup>7</sup>“And the LORD will give salvation to the tents of Judah first, that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem may not surpass that of Judah.

God not only strengthens His people, but He also delivers them from their enemies. His salvation is comprehensive, and includes victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

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However, the emphasis in verse 7 is not on the type or extent of His salvation, but rather on its prioritization.

The *tents of Judah* are contrasted here with *the house of David* and *the inhabitants of Jerusalem*. As we saw in verse 2, both “Judah” and “Jerusalem” stand for the united people of God, i.e., the entirety of the church. But in the historical context of Zechariah’s time, living in Jerusalem had more glory or honor attached to it rather than living scattered throughout the villages, farmland, and open towns of Judah. Jerusalem was the center of the theocracy, the capital of the nation, and the location of the temple, the Jewish religion, and the presence of God. It was also more densely populated and protected, as there was safety in numbers. In Zechariah’s day, the Davidic prince, Zerubbabel, lived and worked in Jerusalem. The relatively humbler existence of the Judean countryside is indicated by the term *tents*, which suggests temporary or impermanent dwelling places, and also implies a lack of protection against an invading enemy.

It is these more lowly residents of the open country that the LORD will save or deliver *first*. The primary reason here is to suppress the sin of pride that is potentially present in the more gifted and privileged members of the community. While the *house of David* and the *inhabitants of Jerusalem* might have more seeming outward *glory*, God’s people need to understand that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), or as the old KJV puts it, that He is “no respecter of persons.” Indeed, the inversion of earthly prerogatives is one of the great themes of our Savior’s earthly ministry:

<sup>25</sup>But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup>even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

The elevation here of the countryside residents of Judah reminds us that there are no insignificant Christians in the kingdom of God. The eternally precious blood of Christ was shed for every one of His elect, and as a result we each have infinite value in the economy of heaven:

Christians often think it is only those in illustrious positions who may count on God’s help in extraordinary ways. But here the ordinary people of God, and not those who dwell in the shadow of the temple and near to the throne, are told of God’s special care for them. Though lowly in the world, they are not forgotten by God. It is one of the glories of Christianity that the weakest may be most sure of the Lord’s strengthening hand (Phillips, p. 264).

### 3. Security (12:8)

<sup>8</sup>*On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.*

In verse 8, Zechariah builds on the theme he introduced in verse 7. In the previous verse the weaker, more vulnerable, and humbler residents of Judah were delivered from their enemies before the more privileged and glorious residents of Jerusalem. Here in verse 8, we see a similar upskilling, this time of the residents of Jerusalem, in the promise of the LORD to *protect* or “shield” them (cp. Is. 31:5). God’s protection of His people against their enemies has the additional benefit of making their stronger warriors.

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Even *the feeblest among them* will be imbued with new vigor and strength, so that they *shall be like David*, the slayer of the giant Goliath and the greatest warrior-king in the history of Israel. The *feeblest* is literally “the one who stumbles”—the picture is of someone who either through disability, injury, weakness, age, or temerity, is unable even to stand without assistance. The likelihood of such a one striking fear into an enemy through strength of arms is laughable.

And yet, that is what God does to each and every one of His believing children, through the power of the Holy Spirit. On our own, we have no spiritual strength; not only can we not stand, we are not even spiritual alive, being dead in our trespasses and sins (cp. Eph. 2:1). But through the riches of His grace, He raised us up from the dead and made us spiritually alive together with Christ (cp. Eph. 2:4-5), and Has given us His Holy Spirit to train us in spiritual warfare that we might “stand firm” (Eph. 6:13).

While even the weakest and most humble Christian can rest secure in the spiritual blessings received through Christ, He promises even greater ability and power to those who lead. *The house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.* Zechariah is not suggesting that some select few humans are made into gods or given Godlike powers; rather, they are given special leadership abilities to shepherd the flock, reminiscent of the Angel of the LORD *going before* Israel and leading them through the wilderness (cp. Ex. 32:34; 33:15; Is. 63:9):

He speaks of a supernatural empowering for all of God’s people, from the least to the greatest. Even the feeblest among His people will be able to achieve feats of faith in His name, like those displayed in the life of David, the man after God’s own heart. As for the leaders, they shall rise up in the might of God, guiding and inspiring confidence in the church as did the Angel of the LORD for the tribes of Israel (Phillips, pp. 264-265).

### 4. Summary (12:9)

<sup>9</sup>*And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.*

In the Scriptures, when someone “seeks to” do something, it is akin to a Texan saying “I’m fixin’ to” do something, that is they “intend to” take action. When a person says this, the execution of the action depends upon his will, his circumstances, and his ability. If he is lacking in any of these essential attributes, he may not be able to carry out his intentions. However, when God says He *will seek to* do something, it is as good as done, a *fait accompli*. Whatever God sets His heart to do, will be accomplished. And here in verse 9, His purpose is *to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem*, which is essentially a summary of this entire passage. God has set His eye on the church for her good, and He will surely protect her by granting her strength within and defeating her enemies without.

### ***Conclusion and Application***

As long as this age lasts, the City of God will constantly be assaulted by the forces of the City of Man. This ongoing spiritual conflict is portrayed in Zechariah 12:1-9 as the nations of the world besieging Jerusalem. In a series of vivid pictures, the LORD is portrayed as defending His people by stunning the nations. This is followed by a series of promises that the LORD will strengthen His people.

In chapter 11, the Good Shepherd broke His staffs of *Favor* and *Union*, leading to the withdrawal of His protection against outside enemies and the breakdown of internal cooperation amongst the

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defenders of Jerusalem. In history, that physical city was crushed by the Roman legions in judgment for the Jews' rejection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. However, here in chapter 12, it *Favor* and *Union* remain unbroken, since the spiritual city of Jerusalem is protected within and without by God's presence and power. The church of Jesus Christ enjoys His *Favor* in that they are protected from the wrath of the ungodly. The City of God also enjoys the privileges of *Union*, as the entire people of God is blessed with unity of strength, of salvation, and of security. That truth should give us the assurance we need to rely on the LORD for spiritual strength to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil and to persevere until the end.

Despite opposition of a world at enmity with Christianity that at times seems overwhelming, we can have assurance that *throughout the church age, God protects His people against all enemies and gives even the weakest Christian strength to persevere until the end.*

In the time of David, Jerusalem was impregnable, and in the exodus the tribes of Israel marched victorious because the angel of the Lord, manifested in a cloud of smoke and fire, was striding at their head. In due time, the One who was that angel, and who has appeared numerous times in Zechariah as such, came into the world enfleshed in lowly humanity, that He might be our champion and Lord. Jesus Christ conquered our foes—sin and the devil and death—on the cross, and now He reigns as our king forever.... In His might that church will find strength to endure in days ahead, until the final trumpet sounds and the battle lines are separated by His return in glory. Meanwhile, in all our struggles with fear and temptation and sin, we may look confidently in Him for help, seeing His design that “the inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through the LORD of hosts, their God” (12:5) (Phillips, p. 265).

As the above quote emphasizes, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, has conquered all our foes. The nations have raged, but our God has laughed, because it is the Son of God, who rules the nations with a rod of iron and strengthens His people against all adversity. Blessed are all in the City of God who takes refuge in Him:

<sup>7</sup>I will tell of the decree:

The Lord said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.

<sup>8</sup>Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.

<sup>9</sup>You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”

<sup>10</sup>Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

<sup>11</sup>Serve the Lord with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.

<sup>12</sup>Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:7-12).

For next time: Read Zechariah 12:10-14.