

Zechariah 1:1–21 — Returning to the Lord and the Call to Rebuild

As we open the book of Zechariah, we remember that he served during the same period as Haggai. Both prophets ministered in the early years of the Persian Empire, during the second year of King Darius. Haggai delivered his messages in the sixth, seventh, and ninth months of that year. Zechariah's first prophetic word came in the eighth month, right in the midst of Haggai's ministry.

The Setting: Returning Exiles and Deep Discouragement

Israel had been in Babylon for seventy years. Their captivity had cured them of idolatry, but it had also plunged them into the commercial world of Babylon, a place of immense wealth and trade. The Jewish people excelled there, adapting quickly and succeeding in business. Many Jews became so prosperous that when the opportunity arose to return to the land, most chose to stay in Babylon. Only about fifty thousand returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.

Those who returned quickly realized that their memories of Jerusalem did not match reality. What remained was not the city of their childhood stories but a pile of ruins. Solomon's glorious temple, built with thousands of workers and unlimited resources, had been stripped of its gold and bronze and ground into rubble by Babylonian armies. The task of rebuilding seemed impossible.

Discouraged by opposition and overwhelmed by the work, the people abandoned the construction. They shifted their effort to their own homes and businesses, and the temple remained unfinished. God raised up Haggai to confront their misplaced priorities. And at the same time, He raised up Zechariah—a young prophet whose book contains some of the clearest prophetic pictures of Jesus Christ in the entire Old Testament.

1. God's Call: "Return to Me" (Zechariah 1:1–6)

Zechariah 1:1–3 (NKJV)

"In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah... saying, 'The LORD has been very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Return to Me,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD of hosts.'"

The heart of God's message has always been consistent:

"If you return to Me, I will return to you."

This is not mechanical or transactional. It reflects God's desire for relationship. He never forces Himself on anyone. His grace invites, but it does not coerce. He has already taken the initiative by revealing His truth, giving His promises, and ultimately—centuries later—sending His Son to die on the cross and rise again. But the people must respond. This is the rhythm of Scripture: God calls, and each person is responsible for how they respond to that call.

God reminds them that their fathers ignored the warnings of earlier prophets—and they suffered for it. The Babylonians destroyed their land, not because God failed them, but because they refused to turn back to Him.

The message is clear:

Learn from the past. Do not repeat the mistakes of those who hardened their hearts.

2. The First Vision: The Man Among the Myrtle Trees (Zechariah 1:7–17)

Zechariah receives the first of several visions—symbolic pictures that communicate God’s perspective on Israel’s situation.

A Mysterious Rider

Zechariah 1:8 (NKJV)

“I saw by night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse... and behind him were horses: red, sorrel, and white.”

Seeing this strange scene, Zechariah does what any of us would do: he asks, “What does this mean?” God graciously interprets the vision for him.

The horses represent heavenly observers—messengers sent throughout the earth. Their report is startling:

Zechariah 1:11 (NKJV)

“We have walked to and fro throughout the earth, and behold, all the earth is resting quietly.”

The world was at ease, enjoying peace, while God’s people remained scattered, vulnerable, and discouraged. The nations were not concerned about Jerusalem’s suffering—and this displeased God.

God Responds with Compassion

Zechariah 1:12–13 (NKJV)

*“O LORD of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem...?”
And the LORD answered... with good and comforting words.”*

God assures His people that His compassion has not failed. Though they feel forgotten, He promises that His mercy is returning to Jerusalem. He will restore, rebuild, and reestablish His people.

A Promise of Renewal

Zechariah 1:16–17 (NKJV)

“I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built... My cities shall again spread out through prosperity... and the LORD will again choose Jerusalem.”

To a discouraged people, these words must have felt like water to a thirsty soul. The work looked too big for them, but nothing is too big for God.

3. The Second Vision: The Four Horns (Zechariah 1:18–19)

Zechariah suddenly sees four horns—symbols of power and authority.

The angel explains that these horns represent the forces that scattered Israel through the centuries. The identity of the horns is not listed here, but historically they correspond to the major world powers that oppressed God’s people: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

They are the kingdoms through which Israel experienced suffering and dispersion.

4. The Third Vision: The Four Craftsmen (Zechariah 1:20–21)

God then shows Zechariah four craftsmen—those who will “fray,” or cut down, the horns.

These craftsmen symbolize God’s tools of justice. Every kingdom that lifted itself against God’s people eventually fell—not by Israel’s power, but by God’s sovereignty. No earthly power can forever suppress what God intends to raise up.

Practical Application for Today

1. God still calls people to return to Him.
Even when we have wandered, wasted time, or allowed discouragement to stop our obedience, His invitation remains:
“Return to Me, and I will return to you.”
2. Discouragement can stop spiritual progress if we allow it.
The returning exiles gave up the work because it looked too hard. Believers today often do the same with prayer, personal holiness, or ministry. God calls us to rise again and trust Him to supply strength.
3. God sees injustice and does not overlook it.
The nations were at ease while Jerusalem suffered. God was not indifferent. He sees every wrong, and He will act in His perfect time.
4. God’s promises outshine our limitations.
The people saw rubble. God saw a restored city. The same is true in our lives: God sees what He will build long before we see progress.

Challenge for Believers

Are there areas where you have stopped building because the work seemed too overwhelming? Have comfort, distraction, or discouragement replaced obedience?

God’s message is unchanged:

Return. Resume the work. Trust Me to complete what you cannot.

Today, take a step—however small—back toward spiritual faithfulness. Pray again. Read again. Serve again. Repair again. God meets you in the place of obedience with “good and comforting words.”

Invitation to Non-Believers

God’s invitation to return is not only for ancient Israel—it is for you.

He has already taken the first step by sending Jesus Christ, who shed His blood on the cross to save you from sin. His resurrection proves that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

Forgiveness is offered. Mercy is extended. New life is available.

But the response must be yours.

If you have never given your life to Jesus Christ, He calls you now:
Return to Me. Come to Me. I will receive you.

You can pray in your own words, confessing your sin, trusting His sacrifice, and asking Him to lead your life. He will not turn you away.