

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo: ² ‘The Lord was very angry with your ancestors. ³ Therefore tell the people: this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Return to me,” declares the Lord Almighty, “and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty. ⁴ Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.” But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. ⁵ Where are your ancestors now? And the prophets, do they live for ever? ⁶ But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors?

‘Then they repented and said, “The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.”’

Some background to Zechariah. Zechariah means God has remembered. Berekiah, his father’s name means blessing of God. He is believed to be a descendant of Aaron, brother of Moses and that makes him a Levite, the priestly tribe who had no land inheritance, but were entitled to a tithe from the other tribes. The date is October/November 520BC, and Zechariah is living in Jerusalem. Some Jews returned from Babylon when Cyrus, allowed them to return. He is mentioned with Haggai in the Book of Ezra – chapters 5 and 6 as a prophet. Ezra and those who returned with him were engaged in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. In Ezra there appears to be another king, Ataxerxes the first, (the grandfather of Ataxerxes the second who married Esther), and a king Darius the first who cancelled what Ataxerxes decreed to stop the rebuilding of the Temple after having found the decree in the records of his uncle Cyrus to allow it to happen. Cyrus was a Persian king who conquered Babylon, while Ataxerxes and Darius were Medes. The rule of the empire of the Medes and the Persians appears to be split between the two royal houses, and only were unified when the daughter of Esther and Ataxerxes the second married a Persian nobleman – who took the throne as Darius the second because the descendants of Cyrus left no heirs. The cuneiform clay tablet records and the Greeks Heroditus and Xenophon piece together the Persian empire’s history.

Not all those Jews who returned were sincere in this rebuilding project, which was a monumental task involving a lot of hard work which took many years to complete. Some of the returning exiles wanted to keep on worshipping other gods which was why they were sent into exile in the first place. Zechariah like Haggai revealed that God was encouraging the people to keep on obeying all God had commanded. Zechariah was a messianic prophet and he is mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 23 34-36 ³⁴ *Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵ And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.* So Zechariah came to a sticky end, probably around 480BC (40 years after his prophecies recorded in this book) as had so many prophets before him who rebuked the Jews for backsliding and being against God.

This first passage is a reminder that God remembers all that we do. There is no hiding place from God. The role of the prophets in Israel was always to point the people back towards God, because although they were the chosen people they continually strayed and went their own ways. Nothing has changed. Today most people in this country have walked away from God and believe He is not looking and doesn’t care about them. Some worship false gods who demand from them more attention than many Christians give to Jesus. We are created to worship and adore – it’s in our DNA – but often it is aligned to things that point away from God. Zechariah like Haggai and Ezra returned from Babylon, a society where the worship of many deities was the norm. Having just one God was abnormal, and as we see in the book of Esther (480BC), the Jews were seen as different to other peoples displaced and resettled in the middle east (first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians) who now lived under Persian rule. The Persians inherited a situation where the Jews were unhappy about being deported from Israel by the Babylonians and God put it on the heart of Cyrus to allow them to go home to rebuild their Temple. Cyrus was a wise man and far more tolerant of other religions and customs given he had just conquered a multitude of different peoples and tribes and believed that enforcing his religion on others was counterproductive, unlike Nebuchadnezzar who wanted to be worshipped himself. Cyrus realised that Daniel was a capable administrator for Babylon and kept him in post. In the book of Esther, a later king was more self centred and wanted everyone to worship him, resulting in the Jews refusing to obey so that Haman had an excuse to get them killed. For Cyrus, the Jews were a conquered tribe who the

previous ruler had deported and he didn't see them as a threat – they were just one more subject people within the empire made up of many subject peoples who didn't have the political, economic or military strength to pose a threat to the ruling Persians. That judgment remained true for the next 300 years until the Greek ruler (Antiochus IV Epiphanes) of this area desecrated the Temple in 168BC and the Maccabees revolted and managed to gain independence for Judea.

Zechariah reveals what God is saying some years after the Jews had returned home to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. They were getting a bit weary with all the rebuilding. Some were glad the work had stopped and believed building their own houses was a better idea. We see in the Book of Nehemiah how weary they were and how they were also surrounded by non-Jewish enemies as well as Jewish enemies within who didn't want the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt.

² *'The Lord was very angry with your ancestors.* Zechariah, like so many of the prophets tells it as it is. How many preachers today will say that God is angry with our ancestors? How many of the people in this country today have unbelieving or lukewarm parents and grandparents who failed to love God and teach their children God's ways? How many believers in churches today have unbelieving children and grandchildren? The "gentle Jesus meek and mild" image of God air brushes how God must feel when people turn their backs on Him. God has been very angry with mankind before and is probably angry today. The flood killed everyone except Noah and his family. The five cities in the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah were wiped out in the days of Abraham and his nephew Lot. Plagues and disasters killed thousands in the wilderness for disobedience in the forty years before the Israelites reached the promised land. The enemies of Israel killed tens of thousands when the people strayed from obeying and worshipping God. The books of Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record the constant backsliding, the constant disobedience, the constant lure of other gods to be worshipped, and the wickedness of kings and rulers over Israel. Then God had had enough. First Israel's northern tribes (leaving just Judah, Benjamin and some Levites) were deported to Assyria – probably over a million people - and the depopulated land became Samaria which was then populated with people from other parts of the Assyrian empire. Then nearly everyone in Judah – hundreds of thousands of people - were deported to Babylon. God was very angry with Israel... the Bible reveals that clearly. About 50,000 returned under the decree of Cyrus. Just a remnant returned. Most seemed content to stay where they were outside Israel, and that situation remained true up until Jesus returned, with the majority of Jews living outside Israel. After the destruction of the Temple in AD70, the Jewish homeland was sparsely populated by Jews. The Crusades resulted in the depopulation and massacres of Jews in the early Middle Ages. By the end of the nineteenth century there were under a hundred thousand Jews in Israel. Always a remnant.

³ *Therefore tell the people: this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Return to me," declares the Lord Almighty, "and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty.* As so many prophets before Zechariah reveal, God just wants people to come back to Him and He promises to look after them when they put their trust in Him. We see that the promises of God mentioned in **Deuteronomy 28** include blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ² All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: ³ You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. ⁴ The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock – the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ⁵ Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. ⁶ You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

⁷ *The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. ⁸ The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord your God will bless you in the land he is giving you. ⁹ The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him. ¹⁰ Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you. ¹¹ The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity – in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground – in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.*

¹² *The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. ¹³ The Lord will make you the head, not*

the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. ¹⁴ Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them.

Curses for disobedience

¹⁵ However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:

¹⁶ You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. ¹⁷ Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed.

¹⁸ The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. ¹⁹ You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out. ²⁰ The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him. ²¹ The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess. ²² The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. ²³ The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. ²⁴ The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.

²⁵ The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth. ²⁶ Your carcasses will be food for all the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. ²⁷ The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumours, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. ²⁸ The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. ²⁹ At midday you will grope about like a blind person in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you.

The list of curses goes on a lot further and is much longer than the list of blessings. It goes on to mention being conquered, enslaved, deported and scattered among the nations, where they will live in dread, despair and hopelessness. And so it came to pass after the Jews were deported in 597BC to Babylon. But by God's grace and mercy, some came back to do a job of restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. The return was in 538BC in the reign of Cyrus. Zechariah was making this exhortation from God in 520BC, and the temple work was not progressing has been brought to a standstill because the people were more concerned with building their own houses, the harvests had been poor, and there had been opposition from the Samaritan settlers and the Persian governor which halted the work by sending a letter with false accusations to Xerxes who issued a decree halting the work, without reference to an earlier decree made by Cyrus. It was not until 520BC when King Darius sent a letter to the governor referring to Cyrus's decree, that work continued in earnest. The temple was rededicated in 516BC. As mentioned in Ezra, the people responded to Haggai and Zechariah in a positive way, coming back to their senses, by realising that God resided in his temple and would protect them if they obeyed him.

⁴ Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices." But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. ⁵ Where are your ancestors now? And the prophets, do they live for ever? ⁶ But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors?

The Lord says do not be like your ancestors and instead turn away from your evil ways. It was fresh in the minds of the 50,000 who returned to the area around Jerusalem and Bethlehem that their ancestors disobedience and not listening to the prophets was the reason for having been deported.

What does this passage say to us today? We have some visitors from Germany and were talking about what people feel about the future today. What indeed do we feel about the future today? Are things getting better or are they getting worse? What is the cause for the lack of optimism in society today? As Christians we know that the more Christians there are in society, the more blessed this nation will be, because God does bless those who love Him. That doesn't mean we don't have disappointments and troubles, but in general those are outweighed by the blessings we have received. Do we not pray and desire that people would turn away from evil ways and evil practices, and choose to follow Jesus and his ways? Are we not in a society where Christianity is no longer seen in a

positive light but as a negative judgemental wrong restraint on activities which the loudest section of society claims is good for them and must be accepted as normal rather than merely be tolerated? What was shameful just 50 years ago is now seen as normal and shameless. The celebrities in society flaunt their serial relationships which are given as much publicity when they are fresh and when they end in some acrimony - and then the whole episode repeats itself. The emotional damage especially to themselves and their children is air brushed away as the celebrities revel in both their fleeting happiness and fleeting sorrows. Our leaders are just as bad – appeasing those who do things (and want others to approve of things) that God says are wrong, and denigrating anyone with “old fashioned fuddy values” that were the norm not so long ago. While the curses for abandoning God are awful, there must be a time where people come to their senses and realise that the selfish hedonism of mankind doing what is right in their own eyes is not leading to making life better for everyone.

So what can we do? We can pray. What has come across recently is that there are wells to be unblocked in the city to release living water to people who are thirsty but don't know where to find this water. Churches are fairly visible to Christians but for some reason are invisible to non-Christians. Jesus says he will open the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf, and for most in society today – their eyes are blind and ears are deaf to the Gospel they have never really heard. The Gospel message is about the cross of Jesus... that we must take up our cross and follow him. We choose life because the alternative is death, but it involves self denial and sacrifice. If you look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah written at the same time as Zechariah and Haggai lived, there is an emphasis on the need for prayerful worship of God so that the people give him the attention he deserves. Someone the other day came up with a statistic on prayer after having done a survey – the result was astonishing. Just 4 minutes daily for Christians! Is our priority and attention given to the things we want to do? What comes over in the media from church leaders (popes, bishops, ministers) are their opinions on politics, environment and social issues when their job is to proclaim loud and clear the need for all mankind to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The challenge for all of us, is do we give God the attention he deserves? The result of not giving God attention is to be seen everywhere – so the Lord's message through Zechariah remains relevant. *“Return to me,” declares the Lord Almighty, “and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.*

Let's pray.