

‘On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

²‘On that day, I will banish the names of the idols from the land, and they will be remembered no more,’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘I will remove both the prophets and the spirit of impurity from the land. ³And if anyone still prophesies, their father and mother, to whom they were born, will say to them, “You must die, because you have told lies in the Lord’s name.” Then their own parents will stab the one who prophesies.

⁴‘On that day every prophet will be ashamed of their prophetic vision. They will not put on a prophet’s garment of hair in order to deceive. ⁵Each will say, “I am not a prophet. I am a farmer; the land has been my livelihood since my youth.” ⁶If someone asks, “What are these wounds on your body?” they will answer, “The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.”

⁷‘Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. ⁸In the whole land,’ declares the Lord, ‘two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. ⁹This third I will put into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, “They are my people,” and they will say, “The Lord is our God.”’

Last week the prophet Zechariah declared that Jerusalem will be surrounded by enemies yet remain victorious and then Jerusalem will be mourning for the one who they pierced who they failed to recognise as sent by God. This week is more optimistic. A message of hope that the people will be cleansed by an everflowing fountain of water. We expect to be cleansed regularly as we pray for forgiveness of our trespasses, and we are grateful that Jesus is merciful by being willing and able to forgive us. We confess that we are all sinners in need of regular forgiveness. In the days of Zechariah, the mercy of God was more of a two way process: confession of sin needed a sacrificial gift to be made for forgiveness to be granted. The blood of a dove, a lamb or ox had to be shed according to the law of Moses, with the high priest going into the holy of holies once a year to sprinkle blood over the ark of the covenant. After the destruction of the Temple in AD70, that no longer continued to be possible. Jews today don’t sacrifice animals and burn them on altars. Praise God that Jesus put an end to this as his blood was shed once and for all of us for the forgiveness of sins.

Moving on to verses 2 and 3 we remember that the main reason for Israel’s pitiful state over centuries was that the people broke the second commandment – the worship of idols and other gods, which came with a curse if that happened. The main reason that the people worshipped other gods was that they had people in the land who did this who were not descendants of Jacob and they were not all exterminated when the land was settled. Later wives were taken from outside the 12 tribes and these women brought with them their worship of other gods. You could say that Israel broke the first commandment to love God and have no other gods besides him. Loving God involves loving his commandments and obeying them. Most people have broken all of them at some time in their lives, so most people, including the Jews, haven’t really loved God that much at all. Thinking about taking the name of the Lord in vain, dishonouring parents, murder, stealing, adultery and lying is as bad as doing it, even though most of us won’t have committed these offences! Coveting is the only thought crime in the ten commandments

but Jesus extended thinking about doing something as breaking the commandments as well, which the Jews and many Christians wouldn't consider reasonable. Zechariah predicts that there will be a time when idolatry will no longer be tolerated and false gods will be unknown in the land – when all are removed no one will have access to worshipping them. In the days of Zechariah there were prophets. Prophets at one time were seen as honourable gifted men who communicated what God was saying to the people, but now there were too many false prophets and because of their deceiving the people with lies they claimed were from God, they will be stabbed by even their parents. We get a hint of what prophets would wear – clothes made of hair - which is apparently the uniform worn by John the Baptist to show that he was a prophet!

Furthermore as we look at verse 4, being a prophet would be something to be ashamed of, and they would all claim to be ordinary folk like farmers and then lie about having always done this job. Indeed after Malachi who lived shortly after Zechariah, there seem to have been no prophets recorded for the next 400 years until John the Baptist. God appeared to be silent, though many would dispute this as he is always communicating with mankind, but perhaps not through public prophets in those 400 years. There would be a purification of Israel and to some extent this happened after the Maccabees took over from their Greek overlords in 160BC. Idol worship isn't mentioned by Jesus as an issue as he went about teaching the people. It is mentioned in the temptation by Jesus but he doesn't say anything about it elsewhere. So there probably was not a lot of idol worship around in Israel under the Maccabees and Herodian kings that came after them.

Verse 6 mentions “wounds on your body” “inflicted in the house of my friends” (Hebrew – the word “friends” is analogous with lovers or paramours). The prophets of Baal inflicted wounds on themselves and most of the priests of other gods would self harm to indicate how fervent they loved their gods. This is still done among the Hindus who pierce themselves and flog themselves. Come to think of it, it was done by Catholics to punish themselves to indicate the sincerity of their faith. This is forbidden in the Old Testament – Leviticus 19:28 *Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord;* and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.* So anyone who had cuts that were obviously not from injuries while farming would be seen as suspect. Claiming that they were “inflicted in the house of my friends” would imply that the farmer was attacked by lovers and or friends in some brawl to get the marks that looked like those of someone who served a false god.

From verse 7 to 9 the tone changes, and Bibles indicate that these are prophetic verses. The shepherd theme was in chapters 10 and 11. So just false prophets would be dealt with, so also would false kings and rulers. Bad rulers harm the innocent sheep and lambs who will suffer as a result. Who is “*the man who is close to me*”? Other translations say “*the man who is my companion*” and “*the man that is my fellow*” and the Hebrew word is used once in Leviticus 6:2 when it means “neighbour”. The man closest to God would be the high priest. So this is a warning to high priests and the prophecy came to pass when the office was purchased for money. 2 Maccabees 4:7 *But Seleucus died, and when Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes succeeded him on the throne, Onias' brother Jason obtained the high priesthood by corrupt means: ⁸in an interview, he promised the king three hundred and sixty talents of silver, as well as eighty talents from another source of income.* 440 talents is a lot of money – a talent (33kg) of silver today is £20,000, so £8.8million! This king banned Judaism and profaned the Temple which resulted in the revolt of the Maccabees. Jason was a hellenising Jew and died in Sparta

fleeing from the Jews. A lot of people died in the war between king Antiochus Epiphanes and the revolting Maccabees. Not two thirds of the people though.

The passage ends on a positive note if that can be said after two thirds of the people have died. God promises to refine the remnant who have suffered loss of family members and property that they will know God if for them because he says they are his people and they reply that he is their God.

So what can we take from this chapter?

Leaders in the church are accountable to God and have to be sure that they always tell the truth and do not make up anything claiming revelation from Holy Spirit when it's not. It's not only leaders – the shepherds – but those who are prophets. You can scan the internet for prophecies and there are thousands of them over the past 50 years. But how many that speak of the future have turned out to be true? How many that speak of the present are such that people will take on board what is said and respond in the way God wants? The angels of the seven churches in John's Revelation speak truth about these churches which if we were one of them, we might find encouraging for the things God approves of, and somewhat terrifying for the warnings issued.... If we needed to be warned that we were tolerating evil, being lukewarm, or going astray. Zechariah was warning Israel and her leaders that the path they were on would lead to calamity even though forgiveness could flow freely from the fountain God has provided. History has proved Zechariah correct: millions of Jews were displaced, persecuted, and killed in battles in the period from 400BC to AD70. At the end Israel was scattered across the Roman and Parthian empires. There were times of restoration and times of great suffering.

As Christians, we too are in a period of change. Standing up for Jesus is mocked, belittled, and ignored by many, and actively opposed. The Gospel preached must remain true and not be compromised by the shepherds otherwise the sheep will be led astray. We need to be bold and courageous because the Lord our God is with us... just like he is with those refined in the fire who can say that Jesus is Lord.