

Zechariah 14

Littlebourne - 2nd February 2024 - Zechariah 14

Behold, a day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. 2 For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. 3 Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. 4 On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the Mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. 5 And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

6 On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. 7 And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

8 On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter.

9 And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one.

10 The whole land shall be turned into a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem shall remain aloft on its site from the Gate of Benjamin to the place of the former gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the king's winepresses. 11 And it shall be inhabited, for there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security.

12 And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.

13 And on that day a great panic from the Lord shall fall on them, so that each will seize the hand of another, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other. 14 Even Judah will fight at Jerusalem. And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected, gold, silver, and garments in great abundance. 15 And a plague like this plague shall fall on the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and whatever beasts may be in those camps.

16 Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. 17 And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. 18 And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain; there shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. 19 This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.

20 And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, "Holy to the Lord." And the pots in the house of the Lord shall be as the bowls before the altar. 21 And every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and take of them and boil the meat of the sacrifice in them. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

Zechariah doesn't present itself to us as we necessarily want. These minor prophets are books that we often avoid, because they are hard. This chapter is no exception. The last chapters in particular of Zechariah are a bit tricky, because where we have had in earlier chapters some straight up prophecy, that really fits, and some things about morality, which we can get our heads around, the ending chapters, and this last chapter in particular, is apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic writing is found in Revelation, whose name in Greek is "Apocalypse", some parts of Daniel, some of what Jesus tells in the Olivet discourse (Matthew 24, Luke 21, Mark 13), and in the Old Testament prophets, such as here. Apocalypse means revelation, or unveiling - it's a revealing of things, it's a peek behind the curtain.

Now we often take this type of literature as a straight description of future events - we look at Revelation and think that it's telling us what happens next from our perspective, what the future will look like to us. Then we read it and are confused. But this is an unveiling - it's showing us not what happens on the stage, not showing us the obvious that we might see ourselves, but rather what is happening backstage, the things behind the world events. It's a behind the scenes look. In Revelation this is a bit more clear than it is in this chapter, as much of what John sees there takes place in heaven, out of our sight.

What John does see on earth is not what anyone should expect to literally see. For example, when John sees a seven headed beast, it's not that there was or will be a literal beast with seven heads, but that when he looks on the Roman empire, symbolised by the seven heads, which are seven hills and seven emperors, ten horns for the ten kingdoms allied with Rome, etc. in the common interpretation, he's peeking behind the curtain. He sees this world empire as it is, actually monstrous - it was beast like.

This doesn't make it easier - G K Chesterton quipped that John had seen many strange things in his Revelation vision, but none so strange as his commentators. So with this genre of writing we should tread carefully and not rush to conclusions. These symbols require us to think, and to join the dots that we find elsewhere as well.

Previously, in Zechariah...

Zechariah 13 finished with a poetic flourish - including the phrase "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered", a verse used by Jesus (Matthew 26:31, Mark 14:27) as He explained to His disciples that they would all desert Him on the fateful night of His arrest. This poetic section then explains to us that whilst many will fall away, those that remain would, like refined gold or silver, be purified. It will be like that great promise from Jeremiah 31:33:

...I will be their God and they will be my people.

This sets the scene for Zechariah 14, and gives us an example of how to interpret the coming chapter - if Jesus tells us that that verse in Zechariah 13 was referring to His day, when His disciples would abandon Him, what does the New Testament tell us about today's chapter? One of our principles in reading the Bible is that scripture interprets scripture, the clear interprets the unclear.

Rivers of living water

With that in mind, one of the more obvious links between the old and new testaments here would be found in verse 8:

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem...

Compare this to Jesus' words in John 7:37-39:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Jesus is speaking to us on the last day of the feast - which feast? The feast of tabernacles, which we see later. This tells us that when Jesus is glorified and the Spirit given, it will be like living waters are flowing from the hearts of each believer - whoever believes in Him - and we might say as if living waters are flowing collectively from all believers, the church. Jesus says that this is what the scriptures say.

Jesus isn't quoting a specific verse here - he's referencing a collective prophetic themes, alluding to a couple of places in the Old Testament, which refer to living water, including this one here in Zechariah, as well as those verses in Exekiel 47, which picture of the rivers of living water flowing from the temple, bringing life wherever it flows. It waters the trees, who bear fruit every month, all year round, and whose leaves are for healing, it says.

The other place we might think of where rivers of living water are found is in Revelation (22:1-2) - the river flows from the throne of God at the centre of the new Jerusalem, out of the city, and it waters the trees, whose leaves are said to be for the healing of the nations, very similar.

So it's not that we see a literal river flowing from Jerusalem. We see something much more like we saw at the beginning of chapter 13 (v1), "a fountain opened for David and Jerusalem, to cleanse them of sin and uncleanness", which was not a literal fountain. Jesus tells us these living waters reference the Spirit. Now if that's what living waters mean, then what does Jerusalem mean?

Jerusalem

In this chapter we see Jerusalem throughout - we see it besieged (v1-2), but defended by God (v3-5). We might think again of AD 70, or the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem a generation before Zechariah. Or we might think of Revelation again, where Satan attacks the camp of the saints, but God defends them.

We see that the Lord goes out to battle those nations that stand against His city, much as Christ is portrayed in Revelation, as a warrior king, that slays by the sword from His mouth, by the power of His word.

We see that Jerusalem is likewise where this living water flows from, and not just sometimes, but all year round (v8). We read that everywhere else around is laid low, becomes like the Arabah, the lowland of the dead sea area, except Jerusalem (v10). Jerusalem is held aloft, and inhabited securely, never to be destroyed (v11).

This reminds us of Isaiah 40:3-5, a familiar few verses:

A voice cries:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

The new testament cites this in reference to John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus. Now John the Baptist didn't go out into the wilderness with a big bulldozer and start trimming down the mountains and filling up the valleys - the way he 'lifts up the valleys' and 'makes low the hills', was by preaching the word of God, calling for repentance and administering baptisms. He does church-y stuff to remake the landscape.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:14-15:

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

Was this wall a physical wall separating Jew and gentile? No, but nonetheless it was broken down. We're seeing here in Zechariah Jerusalem on the one hand as a mountain fortress - secure and lofty, defended by God, but on the other hand, the removal of all obstacles in reaching her. The old Jerusalem is nestled in the mountains, hard to get at, surrounded, but the New Jerusalem is, to use Jesus' words, "a city on a hill" (Matthew 5:14).

However those that refuse to go to Jerusalem won't have any rain (v18). We've already seen the symbol of water, in the river, so think what this represents. Who receives the Holy Spirit, vs those that don't? What's represented here?

Maybe some of you remember way back in May 2022, when we did the Psalms of Ascent and we looked at Psalm 122.

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

*I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"*

*2 Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!*

*3 Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,
4 to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.*

*5 There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.*

*6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
"May they be secure who love you!*

*7 Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!"*

8 For my brothers and companions' sake

I will say, "Peace be within you!"

9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your good.

Now the question when we look a Psalm like this is what relevance does that have to us today? It's all about Jerusalem and the temple, and we're a long way from Jerusalem and there's no temple standing there any more. And since we've been reading our Bibles, we know we don't need physical Jerusalem and a temple to worship God anyway, so what's the application for us?

But where should we glad to go to? Where might we find many tribes, yet unity of purpose to give thanks to the Lord? Where can we find peace and security? Where or who?

For David, Jerusalem was the centre of his worship, where he met God, but for us, we don't go to a particular place, instead we are part of a particular people. Our focus is not the temple, our focus is Christ. Seen through a different lens, this Psalm is very applicable today. This is how we read the Old Testament - in light of Christ.

We read in Hebrews about this, Hebrews 12:18-24:

18 For you have not come to what may be touched ...

22 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, 23 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, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We belong to the Jerusalem above (see Galatians 4:26). Those who are in Christ, are citizens of His kingdom, His city.

Near the end of Revelation, we see the new Jerusalem - the city where God and his people dwell. This new Jerusalem is described as being 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' - it's the bride of Christ, the church dwelling with Christ, with no separation. At it's centre is no longer a temple built with human hands, but Christ on his throne, from which this river of living water flows.

So if the picture we see in the Jerusalem here is God's people, the church, then what is this telling us about the church? Well it's pretty optimistic.

The church protected

At the beginning of the chapter, we see Jerusalem assailed, all the nations fight against her. They might even appear to be winning. But God steps in and goes to bat for Jerusalem (v1-5).

It says that His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives - who do we know who did that? Now the Mount of Olives is on a ridge higher than the city of Jerusalem, higher than the temple mount by about 80 metres or 250 feet. Remember that Jesus taught about the temple there, and points it out - you could see the temple in all its splendour from there, a panoramic view.

But this means it's not the way you'd flee the city - you'd have to go all the way down into the valley, and then climb up it again. It presents an obstacle in the way if you want to flee.

But what does God do? He makes a way, miraculously - He parts the mountain, removes the obstacle and provides a way of escape. Think of the parting of the Red Sea - God's people come up against an impossible obstacle, but God parts the way for them. It's an Exodus motif, a picture of salvation.

It'll be like the time of this earthquake in the reign of Uzziah - which is also mentioned in Amos 1:1. We don't see in scripture a record of the earthquake itself, but we see it mentioned as a reference point - this was an earthquake that for the Jews at the time was in their thinking, it was a major event that happened.

What we see is that God protects His people. What was a ragtag bunch assailed on every side, is now billions of people. God sees to it that His people are protected.

Living in the light

We read that at that time, on that day, there will no longer be day and night - evening will come, and it'll still be light. What does that remind us of? Revelation again, (21:22-25):

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever

be shut, for there will be no night there.

They will need no other source of light, because God is their light. They will never shut their gates, because it's never nighttime anymore. The "light of the world" (John 8:12) illuminates all things for them.

The Lord one

Verse 9 tells us that the Lord will be King over the whole earth, and that His name is the only name going. Jesus says in preface to the great commission "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". He is the King of all right now - some don't know it yet, but they will.

We have this strange sentence: "On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name." A literal translation would be more along the lines of "On that day the Lord one, his name one".

But it's not so strange when we realise this uses the same phrase as found in the Shema - Deuteronomy 6:4:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

On this day, not only Jews will confess the name of God, but all will. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess.

Those outside the church

In verses 12-15, we see that those that oppose this Jerusalem will be stricken by plague, panic, and infighting. The plague they suffer from will be one that rots them away whilst they stand, even their animals will face the same fate. Rather than seriously oppose Jerusalem, they will figuratively melt away, and their wealth will instead be collected and brought into Jerusalem.

Verses 16-19 tell us that those who can survive attacking Jerusalem will go there to worship - they will be brought in to it. But those that refuse to worship won't get the rain. I think this is talking similarly to the living waters from earlier. For example in Jeremiah 2 (v11-13):

*Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.
12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
declares the LORD,
13 for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

When people forsake God, they create for themselves an alternative - they try to collect the water themselves, and fail. When we forsake the one who provides us living water, the alternative isn't lifeless water - it's no water at all.

The people of God receive water, living water, in abundance, such that it overflows and streams out of the city, but the people that reject God are dry and dusty.

We see also that the wealth of those outside Jerusalem, their wealth is brought into the city. Isaiah 60:11-12:

*11 Your gates will always stand open,
they will never be shut, day or night,
so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations—
their kings led in triumphal procession.
12 For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish;
it will be utterly ruined.*

Feast of Tabernacles

The difference between these two groups described in this chapter hinges on celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (v16-19). We see the whole world worshipping God at this festival.

The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) is the feast where the Jews remembered God's provision for them in the wilderness. They build these tabernacles or booths, where they remember life in the wilderness, but also rejoice in the provision of God, who sustained them through that time. It's a harvest festival, where they celebrate all that God has given them in crops that year. Compared to some of the other festivals, it's a joyful festival, meant to be enjoyed. It's one of the three pilgrimage festivals - passover, pentecost and the feast of tabernacles. One of the ways in which the festival was celebrated was a water pouring ceremony in the temple, on the last day of the festival. Remember John 7, Jesus stands up on that last day of the festival, the day of the water pouring custom, and says, in a loud voice, "If anyone believes in me, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water".

What the old testament physical symbols and signs pointed to, is a reality today. Jesus tells us that if we believe in Him, we don't have to fetch water, and bring it to the temple, but that better water will be there already, and will flow out to the nations.

This isn't telling us to celebrate just like the old testament israelites did - building booths and pouring water. No, this is water that can't be splashed - this is telling us something about the deeper reality. How do we celebrate this today then? What harvest are we celebrating?

John chapter 4 is the chapter with the woman at the well, full of Feast of Tabernacles themes, where Jesus says He can give her living water, and that who drinks of this water, for them it will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. She goes back and tells the people in the city what happened. Then there's this harvest theme, John 4:35-36:

Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

The harvest comes and rejoicing with it. And what happens next? Many in Samaria believe. The harvest is a crop of eternal life - a harvest of souls. It's the ingathering of the gentiles, the harvest of the church. This is maybe what is being celebrated in this harvest festival that we see here in Zechariah, this festival that the whole world is celebrating.

The priesthood of all believers

Then the last couple of verses of Zechariah (v20-21) tell us that on that day, the bells of the horses will be inscribed with "Holy to the LORD". We see the phrase in another place - Exodus 28 describes the priestly garments for the high priest, and tells us about his special hat (v36):

36 "You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the Lord.'

We see that the common pots in the city shall be like the holy pots of the temple, used right in front of the altar. Every pot will be holy. The most mundane things, the bells on the horses, are holy. No longer is it just the priestly garments that bear this, but everything.

On that day, there will be no Canaanite, or sometimes translated as merchant or trader, in the house of the Lord - that is, that no one that doesn't belong will be there, no outsiders, no one that is not holy to the Lord. Everyone in that city is counted righteous in God's sight.

1 Peter 2:9:

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In the old Jerusalem, the only people who could approach God were the priesthood, and even then, the high priest could only enter once a year into that most holy place. But now, we have no need for earthly mediators, because Christ is our mediator. We don't need a priest, a person to approach God for us, because we can approach God ourselves. This is the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers - everything in the city is inscribed like the holy garments of the high priest, able to meet God directly.

This is the church, the city of God, the New Jerusalem, where Christ dwells in the midst of His people, with no separation.

Conclusion

Some would say this is over-spiritualising the text, that if we don't take things 'literally', we're not really believing what it says. But we have to choose what we take literally. If Jesus says that the scriptures say living water will flow from the hearts of His people, and John says He was talking about the Spirit, then if we take that literally, we need to take this chapter figuratively. Do we take this literally, or do we take Hebrews 12 literally, which tells us about the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem?

What this chapter teaches us, is that God will protect his church, that He will pour our His Spirit on the church, and it will overflow to the nations, who will will not be able to oppose her, but will join her. In short, the Great Commission won't fail - Jesus Christ tells gives us a mission, but as I mentioned, He prefaces it with "All authority in heaven and on earth, has been given to me" - He will see it through.

In Daniel 2, we see Nebuchadnezzar's dream, a dream of a great image made with different layers of material, which Daniel interprets for us as representing different kingdoms. Then in the dream, a stone, cut by no human hand, strikes this image, and becomes a great mountain that fills the entire earth.

Daniel's interpretation of the dream tells us about this stone (Daniel 2:44-45):

44 And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, 45 just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure."

In the days of those kings - kingdoms that followed from Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, God will establish a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, that will conquer all others, that will fill the whole world. What is this? The kingdom of God, whose capital city is the New Jerusalem, the church, and whose King is Christ.

I said this was optimistic - so optimistic that we might have a hard time believing it. But that's what it says.

When we pray for that the church would grow, that people would be brought in, that the world would be Christianised, God answers that prayer. And the answer is 'yes'. Now we don't know when or exactly by what methods God will use, but we should pray in faith, knowing that God has promised His church victory and will see it through.