

Words of Comfort for the Uncomfortable

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm going to be completely honest with you. If you asked me a couple of weeks ago if I wanted to swap passages with what Ben preached last week, I would have said, yes, please.

I would have deprived you of an excellent sermon from Ben, but I don't think I would have been that sorry. Because the opening six verses of this kind of relatively obscure Old Testament prophet took us right to the heart of the gospel, didn't they?

Just look there to verse 3 of chapter 1 if you weren't with us last week. Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you. Repent! Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, and he will come to you.

You will be saved. Welcomed with open arms. In that passage we had lain for us that the foundation of this book, the kind of the platform on which the rest of this book will build.

And it was wonderfully clear, wasn't it? In no small part, because it was preached so well. But very quickly, the waters seemed to get very murky. On its excellent opening chapter on the Word of God, the Westminster Confession of Faith says that not all passages in Scripture are equally plain in themselves.

[1 : 22] Two chapters into Zechariah, and we have, I think, good evidence of that statement, don't we? In verses 1 to 6, we have a clear call to repentance. In the rest of chapter 1 and 2, we are presented with horses and horns and myrtle trees and measuring tapes.

Hmm. But pay attention to the language of the confession. Right? Not equally plain. It does not say, does it, some passages can be understood and others cannot.

Not. All it is saying is that the meaning of some passages is not quite so immediately obvious. It just takes a bit more time and perhaps a little bit more work, but it is there.

And as we'll see this evening, it is right there in the text. I imagine parts of that reading left you feeling a little confused.

Some of it is slightly bewildering, isn't it? Let me offer you some assurance. Maybe you'll find a little bit of assurance in the fact that I was pretty confused when I first read this passage.

[2 : 34] But I think we can all find a lot of assurance in the fact that Zechariah was confused when he first saw these visions. Did you hear how many questions he had through that reading?

What were his first words out of his mouth there in verse 9? What? What are these, my Lord? What is this? What am I looking at?

In order to understand what he is seeing, Zechariah wants to hear God's explanation. And as we step into this section of Zechariah, that is something really important to take with us every step of the way.

That the next five chapters of this book are made up of eight visions. Visions given to the prophet to show the people of Jerusalem what God is one day going to do. So that it would turn to God right away.

And because we are going to come across eight of these visions over the next few weeks, we need to know how to handle them. How do we handle these visions? We actually got the answer to that question from the life of Joseph last year in our series on Genesis.

[3 : 46] Do not all interpretations belong to God? These visions are not kind of like code breaker puzzles where we have to do our best to crack the codes.

We don't have to come up with a hypothesis and see if it fits and then try again until we get an answer that makes some sense to us. None of that. All we need to do is handle them in exactly the same way Zechariah does.

Asking what does God say about what we are seeing here? And listening to the answer he gives us in his words. God gives these visions for good reasons.

They don't kind of pointlessly obscure the point of the passage. They are memorable. They are vivid illustrations of the message God wants to get across to his people. And in order to understand the message of these visions, God gives us everything we need.

Mostly in Zechariah itself. Sometimes outside of Zechariah, but never outside of the Bible. The answers are all here. It might just be that sometimes we need to go a little slower.

[4 : 58] A little more carefully through the text. So that is a little bit of the how. We are going to tackle the next five chapters or so of Zechariah. But let's just touch very briefly on the what of this section before we kind of dive into the first three visions this evening.

Last week Ben showed us that the book is written to a people who have returned from exile in Babylon. But have quickly been kind of wearied by the building project they've returned to. Putting it in kind of the Old Testament context in a sentence. God took his people out of Egypt and into the promised land. But while they were in the promised land, because of centuries of sin, God sent his people away from the promised land and to Babylon.

Zechariah is a prophet at the time when some of God's people are coming back from Babylon to Jerusalem. Last week we learned, didn't we, it wasn't just their bodies that needed to return to Jerusalem.

It was their hearts that needed to return to God. And from what we see in these visions, I think it seems that the people's hearts were slow to turn to God.

[6 : 13] Or needed convincing, needed encouraging to return to him wholeheartedly. But because to them, to them then, sitting in a building site that had been put on pause, it appeared that things were going much better for the people who hadn't returned to God.

Babylon was a thriving metropolis. Jerusalem was a desolate wasteland. You can perhaps imagine, can't you, when they first got back, the kind of optimism in the early days of the rebuilding project, the youthful vigor of starting something new.

But you can also imagine the deflation when opposition arose. When the building work was put on hold, that little kind of fledgling flame of enthusiasm would have quickly been snuffed out.

It wouldn't be surprising if even when they were present in Jerusalem, their hearts, the hearts of the people, didn't maybe start to wander back towards Babylon.

Have we made the right choice here? Sitting in the rubble of a ruined city. Is this really how we want to commit to living our life?

[7 : 24] Listening to the taunts of enemies, wondering if maybe they should have bought a return ticket. Imagining those who stayed in Babylon enjoying the bustle of a busy city while they are silent amongst the empty scaffolding.

But perhaps you have similar thoughts in your own life. But following Jesus is a life of sacrifice, isn't it? Of cross-carrying.

It is not easy. Perhaps you are sitting here this evening wondering if it really is worth it. If you have made the right choice, wondering if this is the right place to be.

Maybe your heart is wondering from God because the people you know who never turn to God seem to be living a pretty good life. Maybe even as you come along to church on a Sunday evening while your friends are watching the football, you wonder whether or not they maybe have it better than you.

To a people whose hearts are straying from God or at risk of straying from God, these visions are given to show that whatever life on the ground might look like today, there is a day coming.

[8 : 40] There is a day coming when it will be known to everyone that returning to God was the right, the only decision. Zechariah's visions are given as a summons to God's people to live by faith, not by sight, to live in faith and obedience today because of what God promises will happen in the future.

That is what we are going to see this evening in these visions. This evening we are going to take the first three together because they very much do go together. And so instead of taking kind of one vision at a time, we are going to see the two main messages of these first three visions.

We will see each of the points in the text before we are thinking a little bit about what that means for us today. So the first message of these opening visions, the Lord will cast down those who enjoy an unrighteous rest.

The Lord will cast down those who enjoy an unrighteous rest. In the first vision, Zechariah sees a red horse under a tree in a glen with a multicolored cavalry behind him.

The word glen there really kind of points to deepness, kind of unseen depths. And so when the angel reveals in verse 11 that these horsemen are the scouts of God's army who are patrolling the earth, well, maybe we actually already see something of what is going on here.

[10:14] Because here, right, under a tree, deep in the depths, is the army of the Lord of hosts, but the Lord of armies. They are very much hidden, undercover, in the darkness.

They are very much hidden, but the army of the Lord is very much at work. They've not been fully mobilized yet, but they are on high alert, keeping an eye out on what is happening in the world. And what they see, what they see as they go and look out in the world, the report back at the end of verse 11, is a world at rest. That sounds good, doesn't it?

A world at peace, living in comfort, stability, that's what we want to see, isn't it? But remember, they are living at rest while God's people are living in ruins.

And so the angel of the Lord asks God, how long will this last? How long will your people endure poverty while the nations enjoy prosperity? The answer, not forever.

[11:38] For a time, but not forever. The rest of our passage this morning shows us what God is going to do in the future because of what he sees happening in the present.

And the first thing he says is that he will cast down those who are at rest. Rest always sounds good, doesn't it?

But not all rest is good. In 2016, there was a young man in Michigan who pled guilty to a murder charge. He had shot and killed an 18-year-old boy.

He made no attempt to hide it. He owned up to it. But as he sat in the court awaiting his sentence, he was completely at ease. He was able to say casually, with confidence, that he wouldn't be locked up for long.

He said to his friends and family without a hint of concern, don't worry, I'll be back soon. But far worse, when the victim's mother stood up in the courtroom to read a statement, he openly laughed in her face, mocking the woman whose son he had killed.

[12:57] He was at ease. He was at rest. And yet that rest was, it wasn't good, was it? It was appalling. He had done something wicked, and he was okay with it.

He was at rest, but it is an unrighteous rest that provokes in us, doesn't it, a righteous anger. How dare you be at rest? Perhaps you've seen something similar.

To a lesser degree, we will all have some experience of that unrighteous rest. People who we know have done something wrong, and yet are completely at ease with it. It gets under our skin, doesn't it?

It angers us. How much more does it anger God? That is what we see happening in verse 15. I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease.

For I was angry but a little. They furthered the disaster. Judah had rightly been exiled for her centuries of sin, and so God had handed the northern nations a warrant for Judah's arrest.

[14:17] But the nations had gone way too far. They'd not only taken Judah into captivity, they had robbed her of all her possessions and burned the house down on the way out.

They went way too far. And they should have repented. But instead, they were at rest, enjoying the spoils of a war which they had no right to.

And so God sees. He sees the nations at rest, and he is angry. And so at some point in the future, he does not say when, but at some point in the future, he will cast them down.

That's what we see in the second vision there, verses 18 to 21. But verse 19, Zechariah again asks what he is looking at. And we learn that these horns are those who have scattered Judah, the ones who had been given the warrants and had abused their power.

Then Zechariah is shown four craftsmen. We learn in Ezra 3, kind of the contemporary of Zechariah's day here, the craftsmen were those who were employed to build up the temple, to build up God's dwelling place on earth.

[15:39] God sees these craftsmen in this vision and asks what they're coming to do. They are craftsmen. Surely they're coming to build something up. And maybe in a sense they are, but these craftsmen in this second vision, they come to build up the kingdom of God by casting down her enemies.

There might be a season where the peaceful nations seem to have it better. But the Lord will cast down those who enjoy an unrighteous rest, that he might build up his dwelling place, his church.

Perhaps you struggle with the discomfort of the Christian life. Because seeking the growth of God's kingdom is costly, isn't it?

It is incredibly hard work. It demands sacrifice of many kinds. And perhaps you struggle with that. Because all the while, those out with the church seem to be at peace and enjoying a very relaxed life.

God says it will not last. Because their rest is an unrighteous rest. And one day he will cast down all those who have not repented and turn to him.

[17 : 00] That is the first response we have here to what the Lord's army reports back. The second response is this. In the future, the Lord will come to peacefully dwell amongst his prosperous people.

The Lord will come to peacefully dwell amongst his prosperous people. Last week we heard the wonderful news that if we return to God, he will return to us.

We know that is good, don't we? But here we get to see something of just how good it is. Look back up to verse 16 of chapter 1 with me.

But therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy. My house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.

Cry out again, thus says the Lord of hosts, my city shall again overflow with prosperity. prosperity. And the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.

[18 : 06] The Lord returning to his people is a promise of a future filled with joy. Prosperity, peace, a rest that is righteous, and so a rest that will last.

That is what God says will happen. And there's a hope that still lies before us today, isn't it? God has returned to his people.

He has come to his people in the person of Jesus. But the house of God is still being built, isn't it? The church of Christ is still growing.

And so we look forward to this hope much as God's people did then. Not expecting, not expecting it to happen now.

Not expecting to experience it here today, but knowing that it will come when Jesus returns to his people in glory. And we get another glimpse into the greatness of that day in the third vision there at the start of chapter two.

[19 : 10] A man goes out with a measuring line to get the dimensions of the rebuilt city of God. Just how big is this place going to be? He wants to get the length and the width. But an angel has to go chasing after him because this poor man is setting about an impossible task.

It's like watching someone walk up to the Great Wall of China with one of those small rulers you had in primary school. That's not going to work. Verse four, say to that young man, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls because of the multitude of people and livestock in it.

The city is unmeasurable because it contains so many people and because of the lack of walls to measure, verse five, God himself will be a wall of fire all around and his glory will be in the midst.

Jesus. We can feel, can't we, we can feel the wonderful warmth of these words even here and now. Sitting in a warm, secure building in a prosperous country with no fear of a physical foe battering down the doors, these words are still a great comfort, aren't they?

[20 : 22] There is a whole lot of hope in them. But for a moment, just put yourself in the shoes of one of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Here's what we read about their situation in Ezra 4.

Maybe this is just some helpful kind of context. The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus, king of Persia.

That is what Zechariah's audience are faced with. God's dwelling place is in ruins. The walls are non-existent. They have no protection. Their enemies are ever-present. Their hearts are discouraged.

Here are words of great comfort for the very uncomfortable. I am coming to you, God says.

I'm going to dwell with you. My house will be rebuilt. I am going to protect you. Your enemies are going to be cast down and I am going to build up my city.

[21 : 33] The day is coming, says the Lord of hosts, when I will come to dwell peacefully amongst my prosperous people. We live, don't we, in the now but not yet of this future that Zechariah saw.

God has wonderfully come to us. He does protect us. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He is building up his church into a great multitude of people from many nations.

It is happening. And yet there is also a day to come when the city of God will be consummated in eternal glory. When we as his people will never again need to fear the fiery darts of the enemy. When we will dwell with him in an eternally righteous rest. That is what God has said is going to happen. That day is coming.

The day when he will cast down those who enjoy an unrighteous rest. The day when he will dwell with his people in an everlasting peace.

[22 : 41] It is coming. Three points of application then off the back of these visions, all of which are actually kind of laid out for us there in verse 6 to 13 of chapter 2.

But first of all, repent. We heard it last week but we need to hear it again and again and again and again, don't we? But perhaps you are living at peace in the earth because it seems more prosperous right now, more comfortable than life of a disciple of Jesus does.

If that is you, listen to these words of warning. The days are numbered. That there might be some kind of rest out there but it will not last because it is not goods.

In verse 6 and 7, God calls his people to flee from the land of the north to return to Zion, to return to the ruins of Zion. It wouldn't sell well in the travel agents but that is where God's people need to be. There in Zion, here in God's church, in what the world sees as weakness, in what the world might look on as ruins. But this is where God will come to his people.

[24 : 01] Turn to God. But perhaps you need this evening to return to God. Maybe you are still outwardly living as a Christian.

You look like you are present in Zion. You still attend church every Sunday but there are areas where your heart has wandered towards the cold comfort that this world offers. The quick action, satisfaction of the fleeting pleasures of this earth.

Maybe you are seeking rest there or maybe you are even just longingly looking over the walls of the church and thinking the grass looks a lot greener on the other side. Return to the Lord.

Up, up. Come to God. Return to Jesus. And he will return to you. Live by faith, not by sight, with your hope fixed firmly.

Not in what you see today but in what God has said he will one day do. Repent. Secondly, rejoice.

[25 : 05] Verse 10. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion. For behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. Notice there, we are to sing.

We are to sing and rejoice because of what God says he is going to do. It doesn't remove the pain of the presence that many of us will be enduring but the sure and certain promise of what God is going to do gives us reason to sing and rejoice today.

even if that singing is done through the tears of our temporary trials. It is what Peter can boldly say to New Testament Christians in his first letter. He writes that because we have been born again to a living hope through Jesus, because we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, waiting for us in heaven, because of what lies in the future, he says, now we can rejoice. we can really rejoice in that glorious heavenly hope that is awaiting us and we can do it now. There is a true and genuine joy we can and should have in Christ, not necessarily because of what we are experiencing right now, but because of what we know is waiting for us in the future.

And that leads on to the third and final application, wait. Wait. Repent, rejoice, and wait.

[26 : 39] The day is coming, but we do not know when. The Lord will do this, but we don't have the date marked in the calendar, and so we are to faithfully, but patiently, wait.

That's what we just sang from Psalm 130. Not impatiently running to the unrighteous rests we might see some people enjoy, but patiently trusting in the Lord.

Even if we have to spend a season doing the equivalent of sitting in the rubble of a ruined city, even if we have to endure seasons of discouragement, moments of discomfort, times of uncertainty, we can wait on the Lord because He is coming.

We can be still because, verse 13, the Lord has roused Himself from His holy dwelling. He is coming.

He will come, but until He arrives, we repent, we rejoice, and we wait. All while praying, come, Lord Jesus.

[27 : 59] Let us pray that together now in response to God's Word. Lord, we thank You that You know the end from the beginning.

Lord, that You know what we face today, but You know what is waiting for us tomorrow. And Lord, that You have promised to deal well with Your people, to do what is good for us.

And so, Lord, we pray that You would help each and every one of us here, whatever is going on in our lives, whatever struggles we might have with our faith or our circumstances, that You would help us to look forward to this future You have promised.

When the enemies of the church will be cast down, when those who enjoy an unrighteous rest will rest no longer, when You shall come to Your people, when You will come to us and dwell with us in our midst forevermore.

Lord, we long for that day. Help us to wait patiently for it. Help us to repent, to turn to You each and every day. Forgive us for the times when our hearts stray from You and look to the things of this world for our comfort and our rest.

[29 : 23] Help us, Lord, to look to Jesus and to wait for Him to return again. Lord, help us to rejoice in the wonderful hope that is waiting for us. May we, as a church here, be a people of joy and a people full of singing, not necessarily because of what we are going through today, but because of what we know is coming to us in the future.

And Lord, as we look forward to that day, we pray, come Lord Jesus for our goods, but most of all for His glory. Amen. Amen.