
Listen Up!

Zechariah 1:1-6

Russ Kennedy

Introduction

Ever seen this bumper sticker? Generally attributed to John Sweeny, AFLCIO labor union leader, this statement became a rallying cry during recent political seasons.



While there may be some truth to that for us in our day, for Israel it was just the opposite. Their being outraged at their circumstances was evidence that they were not paying attention.

Israel collapsed under the chastening hand of God. The 10 Northern tribes of Judah went into the Assyrian captivity where their national identity, language, culture and religion were obliterated by forced assimilation. The 2 southern tribes of Israel went into exile in Babylon where they were allowed to maintain their own national and cultural identity as Babylon only assimilated the key political and religious leadership.

The exile years brought great changes to Israel. Many chafed sinfully against the discipline of God. Many heard God's Word to them and settled down, planted crops, raised children in certainty that the exile years were numbered for no more and for no less than seventy years. The synagogue emerged as the center of worship, teaching and fellowship around spiritual things.

The return from the exile was recorded in our Bibles in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra. The prophetic ministry of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi preached to the heart issues and future prospects for God's people.

Just as we do on this last day of the old year and the new year before us, Israel's return to the land brought many challenges and changes to think about. Their heart issues before and during the exile were brought back into the land with them. So Zechariah is sent with a simple opening message, "Pay attention!"

The Authority of the Messenger

(v.1)

The book opens by establishing the identity and the authority of the messenger.

As a Man in his Times

This is eighteen years after the return from exile in Babylon, in October-November, 520BC. Thus, it takes place between Haggai 2:1-9 and 2:10-23. Zechariah is preaching to a people who have come home, began the rebuilding, but are disheartened at the result. They are seeing the providences of God providing in a smaller and less significant way than they had in their history.

As a prophet, he is ministering when Nehemiah and Zerubbabel are governing the nation and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, is the high priest. These are godly men serving in a difficult time. Amid the ruin and wreck of 70 years of exile for the people and neglect of Jerusalem, they are at work to rebuild. The times of the Gentiles are now in full swing with Israel's prominence in the decline. Yet, the exile is over. They have come home just as God promised. The Chronicles are being written to interpret God's work down through their history so that they will have a post-exile sense of their present place. But what is past is past. Zechariah comes as God's man to God's people at this moment when a new time is beginning to unfold.

As a Man Receiving the Word

God continues to speak to His people. He comes in the Word through a man. Zechariah is one of those to whom the Word comes and through whom the Word is spoken. He is a prophet speaking God's Word and applying it to the people. What we have is the recorded, inspired, inerrant record of the message God gave. In both what Zechariah spoke and in what we have recorded, is the very Word of God.

In all the Scriptures, when God comes in the Word through a man, He is giving that man authority. The authority is not imbedded in the man himself. It is the Word from God through the man for the people. The prophetic and apostolic offices carried an authority that is immediate and direct. When they spoke, they were to be given special attention. They were being carried along by the Holy Spirit so that the Word they spoke from God or the interpretation of they gave of the Scriptures they had was authoritative. They were protected from error by the inward work of the Holy Spirit.

As a Man Speaking the Word

Zechariah, having received the message from God, now speaks it. He has been entrusted with it, now he must communicate it. He is charged with being a steward, a spokesman for God. He is not speaking his own word. He has no freedom to decide what to say. He is bound to the Word he has received to speak it. So the prophet must be faithful as a man under the Word as he is a man with the Word.

We who receive the Word and speak the Word have authority, but of a different category. We are fallible, human interpreters working with an infallible, inerrant, inspired text. While the Holy Spirit illuminates the text and enlightens the mind, our authority in preaching has power *when we are getting the text right and getting it across*. For Zechariah as a prophet, it is a direct authority. For us as pastor/elders, it is a derived authority. However, it is still the Word with authority. We still do speak and preach. It is our aim to be faithful transmitters and communicators of the final Word, the Scriptures.

So this minor prophet opens with a major declaration. Here is God's man with God's message for God's people, as they move into a new time in their lives.

The Importance of the Message

(v.2-4)

The Word of God comes to the man of God who must speak it with authority from God. But the importance of the message (that is, the rest of the book of Zachariah) is highlighted in this paragraph.

In the Anger of the Lord

(v.2)

God's anger highlights the importance of Word. He was angry with their fathers. This verse's five words in Hebrew literally say: 'Angry was the LORD with your forefathers with anger.'¹ That anger against their sin resulted in their discipline. God moved to challenge, chasten and change His people. His anger was vigorous and visible. Over Israel's long and troubled history, God was often angry with Israel and dealt with them as such. After long and patient dealing with a rebellious and stubborn nation, He sent them into exile into Assyria and Babylon. So the importance of the prophetic message is underscored by pondering the anger of God in the past.

Now, make no mistake. The anger of the Lord is an important concept in the Bible. Anger may be simply defined as a whole person expression and experience of being against something or someone.² God's anger is an expression of the purity of His character and the passion for His glory. He is against those who practice, provoke and promote evil. He is against iniquity and injustice. He is against doubt and disobedience. His anger is patient, long-suffering and terrible. His anger is potent, righteous and victorious. You must have a place in your theology for the anger and wrath of God. Otherwise, you will come casually and even carnally to the hearing of the Word.

In the Call to Repent

(v.3-4a)

The importance of the Word resonates through the call to repent and to return.

Return to the Lord

Unlike their unheeding fathers, they need to return to the Lord. This came with shock and surprise to the ears of the former exiles. We know this from the book of Malachi. Having been brought back to the land and the city, they assumed they were OK with God. But we find that almost immediately, the Israelites became involved in many of the same sins as they had before. They robbed the poor, intermarried with Gentiles, neglected spiritual work, disobeyed God ordained leadership and other sins too numerous to rehearse.

So, Zechariah comes with the Word from God which is, "Come back to God. Repent and return." God makes a hope-inspiring promise to them. If they will return to Him, He will return to them. This is ever God's way. He meets the humble, contrite petitioner with love, mercy and grace.

¹ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Zec 1:1.

² See *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Fall-Winter 2006/2007

Return from their Sin

How will they return to the Lord? By turning away from their sin. The Lord of hosts summons them to turn from their evil ways and their evil deeds. This is a way of saying to turn from their wicked character and their sinful conduct. Their way was both the inward, sinful bent of their heart as well as the engrained, thematic patterns of sin. Their evil deeds were the outward expressions and experience of sin. It was the fruit.

Returning to the Lord means that we must turn away from our sin. Now at first this might seem trite; this is obvious. Yet, we have not grasped this as well for ourselves as might. Too many of us are wanting our Savior and our sins. We want to move toward God and bring our sins along with us. This is not repentance. Repentance is a whole being turning from sin to our Savior. This is not just an initial act, but a constant repenting as a believer. This repenting is our returning, not to our best self, not to psychological wholeness, not to relational oneness, but to GOD.

In the Failure to Hear

(v.4b)

Finally, the message is emphasized in the failure to hear. They did not pay attention to all of God's warnings. Sometimes, not paying attention can bring small embarrassments. We can miss the note in bulletin and show up for church tonight (there is no service). We can not pay attention to the order in which something is to be put together and find that we have to take it apart again. But not paying attention to the God who speaks is dangerous. Not paying attention to an angry God is deadly.

Here is the heart of the message from Zechariah to us: Do not fail to hear or pay attention. They needed to ponder carefully the folly of their forefathers. Like them, we need to peruse the Scriptures to see what being God's people means. Like them, we need to pay attention to the fullness of God's Word and the failures of God's people.

Why? In failing to pay attention to the message, they were failing to hear and heed the Lord. As we come into this New Year with all the opportunities and challenges before us, we had better pay attention to the Lord. As the author of Hebrews says, God has spoken in various ways through the Old Covenant and now has spoken with fullness and finality in His Son. We have in our Bibles the full record and explanation of both. And this warning rings in the New Testament as well. Paul writes that what happened in the Old Covenant and is recorded in the Old Testament is for our instruction. It was God's intention to so order the lives of His people then so that the record of them in the Bible speaks to us now.

Will we be a people who pay attention to God in His Word this year?

The Response to the Message

(v.5-6)

As an example to the returning exiles, God highlights their believing response to the message.

Understanding the Certainty of the Word

(v.5-6a)

Don't miss what is being said here. People come and go but what God says is sure. Where are their forefathers? They have passed off the scene, most in disobedience and dishonor. So God has dealt with them. They are no longer. This is not just in the sense of their physical death, but also in the sense of their lasting testimony. They have come and gone and left little in the way of a permanent spiritual mark.

But what God has said did in fact come to pass. In a curious turn of phrase, the Word God had spoken *overtook them*. The sure prophetic word and warning swept over them in the march of history along the path of God's plan and purposes. So pay attention to the Word because it is true. It will do its work. What it says will come to pass.

Submitting to the Chastening of the Lord

(v.6b)

They repented as they recognized and bowed to the way the Word interpreted their troubles. The message from the prophets was that God was at work in all their trouble. He had designed, determined and dealt out what was good and wise in His sight. Their hardships and exile were not chance events with God in some way running to catch up. Or even worse, they were out of God's control and He is now playing catch-up.

No, they submitted to God's dealing with them. They believed in the sovereign providence of God. They had faith in God's wise and fatherly chastening. They wanted what He had purposed. Their desires even for the magnificent good God had promised them they submitted to God. They were humbled under His hand. This was the good work the exile did in many hearts. This was the good work the messenger from God with the message of God expected in the hearts of the people.

So the message to pay attention to God, to what He has done with His people, what He has and is saying to His people, is not just about sitting up straight and taking good notes. It is not even about understanding all that God has purposed. I am confident that the people to whom Zechariah was preaching had little understanding of how God's purposes were going to roll His promises up into the Lord Jesus Christ and then enfold all the people groups into Him so that in Abraham's son all the nations of the world would be blessed and He would be the spiritual father of many peoples. Even in the message that would follow in the rest of Zechariah, they would probably struggle to understand it.

The message to pay attention to God is a call to humbled hearing and heeding. It is a call to repent, to leave our sin and to return to our Savior. So, in this New Year, will we?

We are ministering in our day as men in our times, as a church God has gathered in our time and location in redemptive history. There are then unique challenges for us. A year has passed. A new year lies before us. As we prepare to move into that year, we will be carefully considering ministry in our times. But at the core of all ministry is the calling out and training up of God's people through the prophetic ministry of the Word, that is, the public preaching of the Word.

Conclusion

The preacher must be faithful as a man under the Word as he is a man with the Word. I am encouraged by so many over the last year. In churches all over this nation and all over this world, many, many men handling the Word of God are awakening anew to their responsibility to get it right and get it across. And, I am encouraged by so many of you who lean forward with all your hearts to hear and heed the Word.

The Word we have is at times difficult to interpret, understand and communicate. Why do I say this? What follows in Zechariah? The prophetic preaching moves from this clear call to difficult visions. The message is neither simple nor obvious. It was and still is challenging. Even given the book of Revelation's use of these apocalyptic visions and images, it is still difficult. But, we must still pay attention. We must still give our ears and bend our hearts to the Word.

There may be times when what is being preached is difficult. Hopefully, it is being done well. But sometimes the Word is hard and sometimes people are dull. Sometimes, we need grace to obey what we already know. Sometimes, others are being fed steak while we are profiting from baby food. In all cases, pay attention. In this coming year, we will continue to open up the Bible and try to preach simply what is there. When it is difficult, ask questions. But in all cases, what you do hear, heed.

Respond to the sweet invitation from the Lord. Return to Him and He will return to you. Take this time of year to rehearse God's dealing with you. And may I suggest, not primarily His good dealings with you – those are relatively easy. Ponder carefully where it has been hard. Pray over where you have had questions. Weigh carefully the manifold wisdom of God who has brought or allowed everything that has happened to you this year past. And ask yourself, "Am I gladly humbled and sweetly surrendered in all that God has done? And am I poised to eagerly embrace His purposes in the coming year?"

Humble yourself under God's providence in the coming year. Do not reject the discipline of the past year. Embrace the duties of the new. Engage the Word of God in every sphere of life. For God's sake, pay attention!