

Zechariah's Word

- ¹ In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD¹ came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying,
- ² "The LORD was very angry with your fathers.
- ³ Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.
- ⁴ Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD.
- ⁵ Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?
- ⁶ But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.'"

Zechariah 1:1-6

The Veil is Taken Off

EACH WEEK IN OUR CHURCH'S WORSHIP SERVICE, we read a portion of God's law, and then later we read from the gospel. Both wings of the Protestant Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed) taught that there are two basic "words" of Scripture. That is, all Scripture can be divided into two basic categories. These categories are [law](#) and [gospel](#).

These are not equivalent to OT (law) and NT (gospel), because there is gospel in the OT ([Gen 3:15](#); etc.; cf. [Rom 1:1-2](#); [1 Pet 1:10](#); etc.) and law in the NT ([Gal 5:19-21](#); [1 Tim 1:9-10](#); etc). Rather, it is the form of communication that is coming to us that determines if it is law or gospel. [Law](#) is that which God commands. As a reflection of his holiness and justice, in and of itself it is good. Yet, it threatens without mercy anyone who refuses to obey it. This is its curse to fallen men.

Of course, people are often not given the punishment they deserve for breaking God's law. But this is not because of the law properly speaking. Rather, it

¹ λόγος κυρίου πρὸς Ζαχαριαν (logos kuriou pros Zacharian; Zech 1:1 LXX). The Hebrew for "word" here is *debar* (see also [vs. 7](#)).

is because of God's mercy which is found in the good news or [gospel](#). Oh, how he is rich in kindness and compassion! Because of the gospel, God does not punish all law breakers as soon as they deserve it. But what is this gospel?

It is obscure to those who have never met the Person who embodies and proclaims it to people through his Holy Spirit and the means of grace. For this reason, each week after we read the gospel we have a [prayer](#). The prayer reflects this understanding and our desire to have God be gracious to us by letting us understand the good news:

Lord God,
We are unable to see the glory of Christ unless the veil is taken off of our eyes.
Thank you for revealing Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ to us in these pages.
We pray now that you would allow us to see the gracious provisions
that you have made for your people through these promises.
Illumine our minds by your Holy Spirit we pray.
Amen.

In Christ the veil is taken off of our eyes. This thought comes from the Apostle Paul reflecting upon the veil that Moses would wear when he came into the presence of Christ to receive the law in the tabernacle. “[For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” \(2Co 3:14-16\).](#)

Today we start a new study in [Zechariah](#). Zechariah is the [second to last book](#) of our OT. It is one of twelve so-called “[minor prophets](#).” Our church has never gone through a minor prophet before, and that is one of the reasons I decided to preach from this book. This particular prophet is also interesting because he is so apocalyptic, very much in the manner of Revelation.

They are called “minor” not because of their lack of importance, but simply because of their [length](#). They are much shorter than the major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.² Zechariah is the longest of the minor prophets, but it is still shorter than the shortest major prophet: Daniel.³ Zechariah has 14 chapters that can

² There are five “major prophets.” Lamentations is included even though it is short because it was written by Jeremiah. Daniel is the fifth.

³ Daniel has only 12 chapters but 357 verses (the LXX of Daniel is even longer). Zechariah has 211 verses.

be divided into roughly two parts: **1:1–8:23** and **9:1–14:21**.⁴ But what is the book about?

Jerome (c. 347–420) called Zechariah “the obscurest ... of the twelve prophets”⁵ The Jewish scholar **Abrabanel** (d. 1508) took it further and added that it is “so obscure that no expositor however skilled have found their hands in the explanation.” Finally, Solomon ben Isaac who is better known as **Rashi** (1040-1105 A.D.) went all the way saying, “We shall never be able to discover the true interpretation until the teacher of righteousness arrives.”⁶ With these thoughts, you might think I’m crazy for attempting this book. But Rashi lived 1,000 years after Christ and refused to believe that the Lord Jesus was that Teacher of Righteousness. Therefore, as the Apostle said, the veil still remained upon his eyes. His own words prove the truth explained by Paul.

If I could therefore say anything at the outset of this series it would be that **in Christ the veil is removed and Zechariah’s famous Night Visions can be seen in the Light**. His Kingdom prophecies have their King. But apart from him, you might as well be playing a game of riddles with Gollum (I hate riddles, I’m no Bilbo!). Christ is the key to its interpretation. Just here, I do not mean only in his Second Coming (as many are prone to view prophecy). But also Christ in his First Coming. In fact, this is exactly what the NT itself teaches us about this amazing book.

One scholar has demonstrated, “**Zech 9–14 is the most quoted section of the prophets in the passion narratives of the Gospels, and other than Ezekiel, Zechariah has influenced the author of the Revelation more than any other OT book.**”⁷ Because of this, we will be spending time in both, and through it we will come to see that Revelation is as concerned about the First Coming as it is the Second. Therefore, the living Christ of whom this book is about **warmly invites you** to consider his comings as prophesied by Zechariah, and by the power of God and his Holy Spirit to therefore trust in this Jesus as the only one capable and worthy to take the veil off of your eyes, be it in your need for once-for-all forgiveness or in that ongoing sanctification that rightly belongs to the people of God.

Zechariah: A Short Biography and Setting

⁴ See the ESV Study Bible notes.

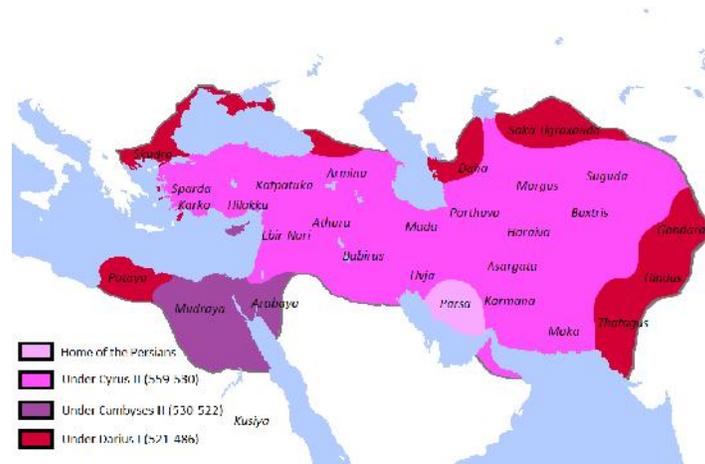
⁵ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 166–167.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷ Paul Lamarche, *Zacharie i–xiv: Structure, Litteraire, et Messianisme*. Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1961: 8-9 as cited in Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, vol. 32, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 167.

Before getting into his book, let's look a little more at [Zechariah and the setting of his book](#). “Zechariah” is a common name in the OT. It means, “[Yahweh remembers](#).” It is a fitting name given the context of his life and ministry. The prophet lived during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, after the captivity of Babylon, when the Jews began returning to Israel. How did it come to this?

The Persian Empire had been founded by the famous [Cyrus the Great](#) ([2Ch 36:22](#); [Ezra 1:1](#); [Dan 1:21](#); etc.) who had been prophesied by name some 300 years earlier by Isaiah.



Cyrus, God’s “shepherd” ([Isa 44:28](#)), would serve the remarkable role of bringing the Jews back to their homeland after the appointed seventy years of captivity had ended ([Jer 25:11-12](#)). He began to rule in 559 B.C. until his death thirty years later in 530 B.C.

Now, I want you to imagine yourself having just come out of [seventy years of captivity](#). You were a child when you were taken from your home and brought to Babylon. You are very old now. You return home to find your land and house occupied by someone else. You have no work. None of the young people remember anything of life in Israel. They all speak a pagan language. You are under the rule of an Empire and a dictator. Most importantly, your temple is gone. You know that this has happened because of the rebellion of your own people. Your God has abandoned you.

What words would you use to describe this? Anger? Resentment? Disillusionment? Discouragement? Hopelessness? Perhaps Psalm 137, attributed to Jeremiah in the LXX captures it better than anything. “[For David, a Psalm of Jeremia\[h\]. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat; and wept when we remembered](#)

[Z]ion ... For there they that had taken us captive [and] asked of us the words of a song ... How should we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psa 137:1-4 LXA).

And yet, in God's amazing grace, preliminary work began on the foundations of a new temple in 537 B.C. (Ezra 5:16), under Cyrus' watch. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope after all? But Cyrus would soon be dead, and turmoil at the highest levels of the Empire would soon ensue. His son **Cambyses** became king. But after expanding Cyrus' empire, Cambyses was deposed by his brother **Bardiya** who seized the throne in 522 B.C. For the next couple of years, it was sheer chaos. Cambyses died under mysterious circumstances. Bardiya was replaced by a nobleman named **Gaumata** who looked like him. He reigned for a few months until finally **Darius the Great** (or Darius I), another usurper, killed Gaumata and became king. Darius was to rule for thirty-six years (522–486 B.C.).



Darius I enthroned, from the Apadana staircase at Persepolis

Into this the first verse tells us “**In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius...**” (Zech 1:1). This means that the prophet began to prophecy in **Oct-Nov of 520 B.C.**, 17 years after the temple work had begun. Why then? What had happened amidst the chaos of the Empire was that **the temple work had stalled**. But then, curiously, this same year, Darius appointed Zerubbabel, a descendent of David, as the provincial governor (a post he likely held for about ten years).

Furthermore, Haggai, who began his ministry just months prior to Zechariah,⁸ had been called and would become the main prophet God would use to help Ezra and Nehemiah pick up the work they had begun. This work was picked up again in Sept, a month before Zechariah's book begins. Ezra sums this up, “**Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them**”

⁸ “**In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month**” (Hag 1:1).

(Ezra 5:1), and “The elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (Ezra 6:14). These two prophets are coming now to bring about a new stability to a people who have been lost in the wilderness of Babylon.

It is into this context that Zechariah’s message will come. His job will be to help the people come to the realization that he would later come to in Ps 138, attributed to he and Haggai in the LXX. “I will give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; and I will sing psalms to you before the angels; for you have heard all the words of my mouth. I will worship toward thy holy temple, and give thanks to thy name, on account of thy mercy and thy truth; for thou hast magnified your holy name above every thing ... Let all the kings of the earth, o Lord, give thanks unto you; for they have heard all the words of your mouth. And let them sing in the ways of the Lord; for great is the glory of the Lord” (Ps 138:1-2, 4-5 LXA). But how would he do it? **What message would he have to give them?**

Before getting to that, here is a little more about Zechariah himself. The first century A.D. book called *The Lives of the Prophets* gives us a short biography, including things that take place before our book:

- ¹ Zechariah came from Chaldea [Babylon] when he was already well advanced in years, and there he prophesied many things to the people, and gave portents as proof.
- ² This man told Jozadak that he would beget a son and that he would serve as priest in Jerusalem.
- ³ He also pronounced a blessing upon Shealtiel at the birth of his son, and named him Zerubbabel.
- ⁴ And concerning Cyrus he gave a portent of his victory, and prophesied regarding the service which he was to perform for Jerusalem, and he blessed him greatly.
- ⁵ His prophesying in Jerusalem was based on his visions about the end of the gentiles, Israel, the Temple, the laziness of prophets and priests, and he set forth the twofold judgment.
- ⁶ ... He was buried near Haggai.

(Lives of the Prophets 15:1-6)

Perhaps a priest himself,⁹ a man of such standing and with such a call from God would have had a lot more to say than merely what is in our book.¹⁰ But this isn't really about Zechariah. It is about his words.

Zechariah's Message

What is the message of his book? The overall theme is the restoration and consummation of God's kingdom on earth.¹¹ How does it come? The second half of the book specifically focuses on what the ESV Study Bible calls "The Return of the King." This message comes through oracles, visions, symbolic actions, sermons, and "burdens." Some are plain. Others are more obscure.

⁹ It is possible that both the Chronicler refers to Zechariah our prophet. Compare the language of **2 Chron 24:20-21** with **Zech 1:1-6**. The themes are similar. If this is true, then Jehoiada would have also been in Zechariah's lineage. Nothing necessitates against this idea and it harmonizes the difficulties rather nicely. See how even non-Christian Jews made this connection calling the Chronicler's Zechariah, "Zechariah, son of Iddo" (*"The Attribute of Justice answered, and thus said: Is it fitting to murder in the House of the Sanctuary of the Lord the priest and the prophet, as you murdered Zechariah the son of Iddo, the high priest and faithful prophet, in the House of the Sanctuary of the Lord on the Day of Atonement, because he admonished you not to do that which was evil before the Lord?"* **Targum Lamentations 2:20**).

¹⁰ **Going Deeper: Zechariah's Death.** The biography ends by telling us that he died when he had attained a great age, and when he expired he was buried near Haggai (vs. 6). However, Jesus' words in **Matthew 23:35** may tell us that he was actually martyred in the temple. I say "may" because it is not clear (even though it appears to be at first glance) that Jesus has our Zechariah in mind. The problem is complex and has been written about for centuries by both Jews and Christians.

First of all, here Zechariah is called "the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo" (**Zech 1:1, 7**). Ezra simply calls him "the son of Iddo" (**Ezra 5:1; 6:14**). (There is actually an Iddo whose father is Zechariah in **1Ch 27:21**). Second, in the Greek, there was a contemporary of Isaiah also called "Zechariah son of Berechiah" (**Isa 8:2**). (The Hebrew has "Jeberechiah," but the Greek has "Berechiah" and is the same spelling as both **Zech 1:1** and **Matt 23:35**). But this Zechariah son of Berechiah would have lived 300 years before the one who wrote our book. Third, there is a Zechariah who was murdered in the temple in **2 Chronicles 24:20-21** who fits both the death Jesus describes and also happens to be the last martyr in Chronicles, which would make him the last martyr in the Jewish Bible, which fits Jesus' point of the Pharisees killing the prophets from Abel to Zechariah. But this is Zechariah the son of Jehoiada. The note in **Charlesworth** explains the problem. "Zechariah the prophet, 'son of Berechiah son of Iddo' (**Zech 1:1**), was frequently confused with the martyred priest Zechariah son of Jehoiada (**2 Chr 24:20-22**; cf. **Mt 23:35**), whose violent death is reported below, ch. 23. In E² the two Zechariahs become one in a conflation of chs. 15 and 23. For an excellent discussion of this widespread confusion, see S. A. Blank, 'The Death of Zechariah in Rabbinic Literature,' *HUCA* 12/13 (1937-38) 327-46."

The facts are, we simply don't know with certainty who Jesus is talking about. If you are interested in more of this discussion see Eric Lyons, "Zechariah Who?" at <http://www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=2078>, last accessed 6-6-2015. Also J. Barton Payne, "Zachariah Who Perished," *Grace Journal* 8:3 (Fall 67): 31-34; S. A. Blank, "The Death of Zechariah in Rabbinic Literature," *HUCA* 12/13 (1937-38) 327-46.

¹¹ **Meredith Kline**, *Glory in our Midst: A Biblical-Theological Reading of Zechariah's Night Visions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 1. See also n. 8 (above).

This return of the King is discussed in terms of **God's Glory being in the midst of his people**. The Glory of God will be their strength and salvation. **"I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the LORD, and I will be the glory in her midst"** (**Zech 2:5**). Christ and the Spirit will be closely associated with this Glory.

From this, two more things follow as a consequence. One is **the elimination of evil**. This includes oppression from the outside and perversion from the inside. The other is the **establishment of God's people**, **"the Zion community"** which embodies God's universal sovereignty.¹²

Finally, **three main groups** constitute the focus of Zechariah's words. These are the **LORD God with his heavenly host**, the **satanic forces** of evil, and **God's holy people**. These are each found in what might be considered the thesis verse of the book: **Zechariah 1:8**. **"I saw a man, mounted on a bay horse, standing among the myrtles in the Deep, and behind him were bay, sorrel, and white horses"** (TNK). In the verse, all three groups are present, **as we will see next week**.

With regard to this it is enough to say that if you want to understand Zechariah, you have to open your mind to both the natural and the supernatural. This, of course, is something Christians should find quite normal. But too often, modern believers have been influenced much more than they care to admit by the anti-supernatural biases of modern *-isms* such as Naturalism, Materialism, and Rationalism, each of which contribute in their own ways to the obliteration of the supernatural from the Western mindset. As Christians, our worldview must be shaped by Scripture. Thus, it will do us a world of good to read and understand Zechariah, for he knows the antidote to modern unbelief.

The Word of the LORD

The opening of the book constitutes the first six verses. We've seen the setting from the first verse. Now let's continue. **"The word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo"** (**Zech 1:1**). Haggai similarly starts with a similar idea, **"the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel"** (**Hag 1:1**). In fact, of the twelve minor prophets, only Amos,¹³ Obadiah,¹⁴ Nahum, and Habakkuk, do not have **"the word of the LORD"** in the first verse. (Two of these books are addressed to Gentiles: Obadiah to Edom and Nahum to Nineveh; a third begins with prophecies to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Amos has the word of the Lord three times elsewhere (3:1; 7:16; 8:12).

¹⁴ Obadiah has "Thus says the Lord GOD" (1:1).

Gentiles: Amos; and the other is addressing the problem of evil in the light of Gentile hostility: Habakkuk).

Why would I bring this up? It is because each time the phrase *debar-YHWH* (“word of the LORD”) occurs in these opening lines, it is always translated as the *logos*. Now, there are several Greek words that translate *debar*. They include *réma* (Gen 15:1; 1 Sam 3:1, 7, 17¹⁵; Jer 1:1¹⁶) and *phōné* (Gen 11:1; 15:4) among others. But *logos* is the word of choice whenever a prophet hears from God. He always hears the *logos* of Yahweh.

This in itself is interesting in light of John 1:1, 14. “In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God ... and the *logos* became flesh (*sarx*) and dwelt (*skenoo*) among us.” According to John, the Logos is actually a Person called the Word of God. But John did not make this up. Throughout the OT (including our recently wrapped up study of Genesis), and including early Jewish sages and, of course, Christian Church Fathers, the *Logos* is a Person both separate from and yet not separate from God. So when it says that the¹⁷ word of the LORD came to the prophet, what are we to understand by this?

Is it merely disembodied words? Certainly the prophet does hear words. His book is a book of words, some of which are direct quotes from the mouth of God. But how did he hear those words? Notice, it doesn't use the plural “words” here (the nominative *logoi* or the accusative *logous* or the dative *logois*). It is the singular: word. “The *word* came.” So again, what kind of word? It is simply talking about a speech or an oracle? In his “word” are visions involved? If so, what does the prophet see? Might God actually be visible to him? How could that even be? In the case of Zechariah, as will be made clear next time, he definitely sees God with his eyes.

Thus, I believe, following the traditions of Abraham who saw the Word (Gen 15:1ff), or Samuel (1 Sam 3:1ff) or Jeremiah (Jer 1:4ff) who were all called by a visible manifestation of the Word who is called Yahweh, that the minor prophets, including Zechariah, are actually having the Person of the Word of God speak to them. That is what this opening verse teaches.

This is what Athanasius taught long ago in his defense of orthodoxy against the Arians, “For they neither feared the voice of the Father, nor revered the Saviour's words ... [when] the Prophets say, ‘And the Word of the Lord came to me’ (see Zech 1:1) ... [which] signif[ies] the eternity of the Word, and that He is not

¹⁵ In this verse, *réma* and *logos* appear together as synonyms.

¹⁶ In the call of Jeremiah, *réma* is only used here. The rest of the time *debar* is translated as *logos*.

¹⁷ The definite article is usually not here, meaning it could be “a word” or “the word.”

foreign but proper to the Father's Essence" (Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 2.32). Commenting later in Zechariah 1 he says, "The Angel said to Zacharias, 'Thus saith the Lord' (Zech 1:3, 12); and he¹⁸ asked the Lord, 'O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem?' and waits to hear good words and comfortable. [This is] the Mediator Word, and the Wisdom of God which makes known the will of the Father (*Four Discourses* 2.31). Yes, The Word delivers God's words. The Word speaks God's words. It is the Word, the Lord Jesus prior to coming in the flesh, who gives the words to the prophets.¹⁹

Yahweh Was Very Angry

So what does the LORD say? The actual oracle begins in vs. 2. "The LORD was very angry with your fathers." That isn't exactly a happy way to begin a book, especially one that has such a fragile and hopeless setting as this one. Amazingly, "very" and "angry" are two words in the Hebrew, not one. They are the same word, but the first is a verb and the second is a noun. They bookend the verse in a poetic manner: *qasap yhw' al 'abotekem qasep*. Young's Literal Translation captures it powerfully, "Jehovah was wrath against your fathers -- wrath!" (Zech 1:2 YLT).

We need to think about this, because it is very serious. Unfortunately, the timing in the life of our church isn't the best, but we'll *suffer* through it (pardon the pun), for it touches on something called the **impassibility** of God. Impassibility refers to God's not having any passions (such as hate, wrath, anger, lust, greed, etc.).

The Church has historically talked about impassibility with respect to the divine *essence* of God, that is, to his *nature* or *being*.²⁰ This is what we talk about when we say we believe in One God. The concern of the doctrine has always been to help people understand that God is not like the gods of the nations: capricious and whimsical, unreliable and frightening because they were constantly changing as they

¹⁸ It is not clear who the "he" is in the English (I don't have the original to consult). Is it the created angel talking to Zechariah who then talks to the LORD (on the horse, who is also the Angel) or is it Zechariah who is speaking to the Angel of the LORD? In the context, it is probably the former.

¹⁹ When we come to chapter 3, I'm going to explain how this is actually what gives the prophet his authority. For meeting Christ like this is a prophetic vision that all prophets had that lifts them up to heaven itself. It is, as Jeremiah says (Jer 23:16), to partake of hearings of the divine council.

²⁰ **Going Deeper:** The history of "without passions" originates in Protestant confessions in the 39 Articles (c. 1563) under the leadership of Thomas Cranmer where it concludes the list, "without body or parts..." Prior to this, "without body, without parts" was without the "passions" addition, and it was speaking about the "one Divine Essence" (see Augsburg Confession of 1530). The 39 articles changed the language of "one Divine Essence" to "one living and true God." This language was retained by Westminster (1644), Savoy (1658) and the London Baptist Confession (1689). Though more difficult to see, it is still fairly obvious that the phrase refers to the divine essence, and not to the three persons of the Trinity.

were affected by creatures (i.e. mankind) both from within and from without. In other words, the gods had passions. Impassibility teaches us that God is not like the gods in these ways.

And yet, it would appear from this doctrine that it is irrational to tell us that God is “very angry” when in fact he has no anger at all, because anger is a passion. I will not get into philosophical speculation over all this today. I simply want us to see the point in the text. The point will be to show us that it is not God that has changed, but the people. If they think that somehow he has abandoned them, they think wrongly. It is they who abandoned him. They sought other lovers. They sought other gods. They violated the covenant. They sinned again and again against his law and his Person(s). God’s anger, then, is simply the natural expression of his perfectly consistent holiness and justice against sin. We see this beginning in the next verse.

The People Were Very Sinful

Vs. 4, “Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD.” Sin provokes God’s wrath. Disobedience to his law makes God very angry.

Again, this anger in God is not capricious or impulsive. It is in perfect harmony and consistency with his holiness and righteousness. For God to not get angry would be for him to not care about righteousness. It would be for him to mock holiness and goodness, thereby mocking himself. So his anger is an expression of his divine perfections rather than a lack thereof. It does not rise up in God passively, as if our sin caught him by surprise and he, like you and I, suddenly just found himself mastered by his anger and unable to control its brutal impulses. Rather, this is **deliberate anger** in that it is the only natural expression he can have when viewed from the perspective of the law, as all sin is lawlessness (**1Jn 3:4**).

This is why when the Lord Jesus—the perfect expression of the Father—gets angry, it is not a sin as it might be for Zeus or other gods whose anger cannot be trusted or controlled. In my opinion, this is one of the places where seeing that it is Christ talking to Zechariah about himself is so important. For if Jesus in the NT can get angry, then surely Jesus in the OT can get angry in an analogous kind of way, especially if he is the Angel of the LORD. This isn’t God in his bare essence we are looking at here, but the Second Person of the Trinity, speaking on behalf of the Father by the Spirit.

At any rate, what sins are involved here? There are **three** of them. The first is that they **did not listen**. What they did not listen to is most outrageous. They had the Word made clear to them through the mouth of the prophet, but they would not listen to Christ. Second, they would **not heed the actual laws** of God. They violated all of the commandments, moral, ceremonial, and civil. For hundreds of years they did this until finally, God divorced them and sent them away into exile in Babylon. Finally, **they did not repent**. Repentance now becomes the song the prophet sings.

Until final justice is carried out, whether (typologically) through a nation being sent away or (finally) when any individual dies and has to stand before God on Judgment Day, until that time God always holds out repentance. Repentance here literally means “to turn” or better, “to return.” It implies a turning away from God and necessitates a turning back to him.

To not repent of sins when God is being merciful and gracious, especially for us when he has sent his Son to die and pay the penalty that sin deserves, is to mock everything that God is. Christ underwent the sufferings of the body, being forsaken by God, and dying, all so that people who hear it could sit there and smugly tell him that they haven't sinned against him? Blasphemy!

LORD Sabaoth

To impress the seriousness of this upon you a little more, consider the title given to God here: “**LORD of hosts**.” It appears **five times** in the first six verses and 53 times in this book, so it is obviously a major idea. Whereas God is simply called “Yahweh” in **Zechariah 1:2**, he becomes “**Yahweh Sabaoth**” after his anger and wrath are on display. This is the title popularized in **Martin Luther's** *A Mighty Fortress*. “**Lord Sabaoth his name, from Age to Age the same**.” What does it mean?

Nehemiah, who lived during Zechariah's time says, “**You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you”** (**Neh 9:6**). The **host of heaven** refers to **the angels**, and more specifically to the angels who are warriors. Throughout the OT and on into the new, angels fight battles *for* God and his people. “**From heaven the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera**” (**Jdg 5:20**). We will see them later in Zechariah 1. Jesus said, “**Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels**” (**Matt 26:53**)? And lest we disassociate “LORD” here from Christ, John in Revelation has

this same idea and look at what he says. “He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses” (Rev 19:13-14).

But sometimes, they fight *against* God’s people. That’s the point of God’s anger here and being called the LORD of hosts. God fought against them at the exile. So this is Yahweh’s military title, like we find in Ex 15:3 where he is a “man of war” or Josh 5:14 where he is the Commander of the Army of the LORD. If God is this kind of God, the repentance is all the more pressing.

Repentance and the Kindness of God

So let’s return to repentance as we conclude this morning. True repentance is an act of faith. It isn’t being sorry you got caught sinning. It says, “I trust that if I confess my sins that he is faithful and just and will forgive me of my sins and cleanse me from all unrighteousness.” It believes that because Christ died for our sins, that we should die *to sin* for his sake. To die to sin is to desire to stop sinning. Verse 6 may be important here, depending on its meaning. “So they repented and said, ‘As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.’”

Scholars are not certain to whom this refers. It could be the generation of the exile—after they were sent away. Or it could refer to Zechariah’s own generation. In either case, such a group did repent. This repentance would set the stage for continual future repentance, as Luther pointed out in his first thesis: “Our Lord and Master when he says, ‘Repent,’ desires that the whole of life of believers should be a repentance.” This would then serve as the backbone of Zechariah’s prophecies. It assumes a repentant people are in view.

Or, Calvin might be on to something when he says, “They confessed that they suffered evils not through chance, but that the purpose of God was thus fulfilled, which they had previously despised and almost derided.”²¹ In this case, the repentance wasn’t godly sorrow for sin, but simply an admission that their punishment was just. Thus, it would be as if Zechariah was saying, “Look, your fathers are dead. You know that God severely chastened them as they themselves admitted. Therefore, repent yourselves now and return to me lest the same thing happen again to you.” In this case, the call to the people is not to make the mistake

²¹ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 30.

of their fathers and trust in the temple that is being rebuilt while neglecting their hearts and obedience to God's word. The people need to repent.

Because each of us in this room continues to sin, this word is for us too. Luther is absolutely right about repentance. It has to be the ongoing activity of your life. There is a first act of repentance that some here may need to enter into as you turn away from your sin and towards the Lord for the first time. But this leads to the ongoing act of repentance. You have to, day by day, moment by moment, return again to the Lord whom you deny in your sins. Repentance is the lifeblood of the Christian life, for it is through repentance that fellowship with God is restored. As someone has said, "The message of Zechariah 1:1–6 is that the Lord has taken the initiative to come to his people through the prophet Zechariah and call them back into a renewed relationship with him."²²

But again, it isn't that God leaves us. It is that we leave him. This is where vs. 5 is so important for it is the grounds of repentance. This ground does not rest in you, but in God. Let us return for a moment to the impassibility of God. The argument here is that people sin and are punished and pass away, but God's word abides forever.

"Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?" (Zech 1:5). "But my words and my statues, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?" (6). In other words, people might mock God's law. People might deny that there is such a thing as moral right and wrong. People can say all they want that God doesn't exist or that if he does he doesn't care about men. They can call him whatever they please and do whatever they feel is pleasurable. But they will die and God's word will remain forever.

Part of God's law, and this returns us now to the beginning of our sermon, is that it threatens upon disobedience. The moral law—that is those commandments that all people have in their hearts that their consciences accuse them of breaking—these commandments do not go away. Nor does the punishment that breaking them deserves. God word abides forever, because God's Word created all things. God is completely unchangeable in his divine perfections, and therefore he will punish sin—either now or later. No man will escape.

Here is why the LORD of hosts is such an important title, for God wages war against unbelievers who wage war against him. They stand alone, but he has the whole host of heaven at his command. He will punish the evildoer and the one who

²² Bryan R. Gregory, *Longing for God in an Age of Discouragement: The Gospel according to Zechariah*, ed. Tremper Longman III, *The Gospel according to the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 20.

refuses to bow the knee to the Teacher of Righteousness, the Word and Wisdom of God, the LORD Sabaoth, Commander of the Armies of Yahweh.

But the good news is that this same Lord of hosts still says, “Return to me ... and I will return to you” (Zech 1:3). This is done by turning to Christ who took the punishment your sin deserves. Augustine has much to say about this verse as it regards Pelagians who refuse to see God’s grace as necessary for returning to the LORD. Let me close our time with some thoughts from him.

When, therefore, He commands us in the words, “Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you” (Zech 1:3) we [should] say to Him, “Turn us, O God of our salvation” (Ps 85:4 LXX) and, “Turn us, O God of hosts” (80:3, 4). What else [can] we say than, “Give what Thou commandest?”²³ When He commands us, saying, “Understand now, ye simple among the people” (Ps 94:8), we [should] say to Him, “Give me understanding, that I may learn Thy commandments” (Ps 119:73). What else [can] we say than, “Give what Thou commandest?” When He commands us, saying, “Go not after thy lusts” (Sirach 18:30), we [should] say to Him, “We know that no man can be continent, except God gives it to him” (Wis 8:21), what else do we say than, “Give what Thou commandest?” When He commands us, saying, “Do justice” (Isa 51:6), we [should] say, “Teach me Thy judgments, O Lord” (Ps 119:108). What else [can] we say than, “Give what Thou commandest?” In like manner, when He says: “Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled” (Matt 5:6), from whom ought we to seek for the meat and drink of righteousness, but from Him who promises His fullness to such as hunger and thirst after it?

(Augustine, *Treatise on Merits and Forgiveness of Sins* 5)

Beloved, God’s word never passes away. He calls each of you to consider yourselves in the light of his law, to turn, and to repent of your sins. Without this, Zechariah will forever remain a mystery to you, as will the rest of God’s word. God is the one you have sinned against. His law demands justice. But he is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Today, he extends forgiveness to all who turn to Christ. As the Targum of Zechariah 1:3 says, “Return to my service [Zeph 1:6; Hag 2:17], says the Lord of hosts, and I will return by my Memra²⁴ to do good for you, says

²³ See the *Confessions* X. 26.

²⁴ “Memra” is the Aramaic equivalent of the Gk: *logos*. It became a hypostasis or personification of God himself and was used as a buffer word throughout the Targums. This is very similar theology to what we discussed earlier and what we find in with the *logos* John 1:1; Rev 19:13 and many other places. It is also found in Zech 1:4, “But they did not listen nor did they give heed to my Memra, says the Lord.”

the Lord of hosts.” “*Return* is the key word of this opening passage, being used four times in only four verses. The Lord’s faithfulness had not changed. His promises, though seemingly dormant, were not dead.”²⁵

May he grant what he commands so that all his elect might find their way to the sheep pen as they hear their Master’s Voice calling to them through good words and comfortable as he makes known the will of the Father.

²⁵ Gregory, 22.