

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH.

I. THE FIRST THREE VISIONS.

IN the first two chapters of this Book there are recorded three visions, all of them of an encouraging character. They were seen by the prophet by night, and probably while he slept. And as in the vision of Dante, he represents himself as accompanied by a guide who interpreted to him all that he saw, so Zechariah, unable himself to understand the meaning of what he saw, is instructed by an angel that appeared to talk with him in his sleep.

In the first vision, Zechariah sees with all the vividness which characterizes the scenes to which dreams introduce us, a "bottom," or small plot of hollow, low-lying ground, planted with myrtle trees. It was probably an actual spot well known to the prophet; and if he was accustomed to retire to it for prayer, as our Lord retired among the olive trees outside Jerusalem, it becomes at once apparent how it should be this spot which was now suggested to him. For no doubt he had often in this quiet garden or plantation used the very words he now hears the angel of the Lord using, "O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which Thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?" Zechariah was a public-spirited man whom no private prosperity could compensate for the indignities his people were suffering during the dreary, ignominious years after their return to Jerusalem. This had been the burden of all his thoughts as he nervously paced under the shade of these myrtles; this his uniform cry as he cast himself perplexed and pained on the earth beneath them. It was this watching and praying, this taking upon himself the burden of his people, which enabled him at length to see what God was really preparing for them.

But familiar as was the myrtle grove, it was to-night

thronged with figures before unseen. The mounted scouts of Jehovah seemed to be gathering there to-night from all parts of the earth to give in their reports. These reports presented an unusual, a marvellous agreement. In every quarter there was peace and prosperity. The whole earth seemed to be enjoying a time of rest and golden weather. "All the earth sitteth still, and is at rest." It was the humbling contrast to this prosperous condition, in the mean appearance presented by the people of Israel, that struck their leader, the man on the red horse, and caused him to exclaim: "How long, amidst this universal prosperity, is Israel to be the strange and sorrowful exception? How is it that the one dark spot on the bright and joyful earth is precisely that spot where God's peculiar people dwell? Is God's inheritance the only kingdom which does not exhibit the marks of a beneficent government and a happy social condition?"

To this Intercessor—this horseman who watches over Israel,—God answers "with good words and comfortable words." This closes the vision; and then the interpreting angel bids Zechariah report to the people the substance or significance of it, to the effect that although God had given His people into the hand of their enemies that they might be chastised, yet these enemies had gone too far, had entered into the work of correction with too evident a zest, and had overstepped their commission; and that now God would compensate to His people for their sorrows.

The practical outcome or substantial meaning of this vision was this: that to every one who sees with eyes cleansed and directed aright, the Angel of the Lord, or God Incarnate, appears, ready mounted, prepared to interpose in His people's behalf, and watchfully receiving the reports of His commissioners from all parts of the earth. It can readily be imagined what a difference this vision would

make in the courage and hopes of the people, with what different heart and conversation they would go out to their building next morning, having been assured that the Lord thought their punishment had gone far enough and that now He was to show His mercies to them. It is easy to conceive with what tremulous joy Zechariah sought the myrtle grove, how he would scarcely have been surprised had he seen it still peopled with those heavenly forms, and how to him it was henceforth always hallowed ground. To his bodily eye there was in the morning no added brilliance in the air; the turf bore no mark of the horses' hoofs that had trodden it; the silence was unbroken as it had been last evening when he had almost thought heaven deaf and hard as he prayed and heard no answer; and yet all was changed to his inward eye, the silence did not now discompose him, he felt no more as if he had the sole charge and burden of his people.

As human history presents a constant recurrence of similar experiences under altered circumstances and in new individuals, so the history of God's people very much repeats itself; and the helps and solace provided for one generation are found serviceable to all. We have our dull and ignominious times when nothing seems to prosper with us, when we feel as if everything Divine were remote or unreal, when our prayers have so long been unanswered that we begin seriously to doubt whether prayer avails. To have an eye for things spiritual makes all the difference at these times. The veil that hides the forces which really rule this world is lifted and we see things in their true relations. We see the swift couriers of Jehovah incessantly streaming in from all parts of the earth, we see that there is nothing unobserved, and that He to whom this detailed information is present does not wait to be urged or prompted by us to take action but that with gravity, earnestness, and impassioned tenderness, He in-

terposes at the fitting juncture. While we are thinking that our efforts to set matters right are not observed or regarded by any higher power, there is a grave and comprehensive consideration of our affairs, a sense of responsibility which accepts and discharges the management of all human interests, an efficient activity to which ours is as negligence.

The second vision speaks for itself. When the four horns had tossed and gored Israel, four carpenters are sent to cut them down. God's zest in removing the executioners of His justice reveals His reluctance to punish. When the causes of distress have done their work they are removed. As a matter of actual experience, men who have suffered great reverses of fortune declare that no sooner had the calamity brought them to the point of a true, hearty and permanent submission to God about it, than it was removed. There are no doubt irremovable distresses, but God can introduce into the life alleviations of distress and compensating joys. He can at all events enable us to see as clearly as Zechariah saw that He will not give us over to unlimited punishment, but allows present distresses only as temporary expedients which may fit us for more enduring and perfect happiness.

The third vision of Zechariah was also based on what was in his thoughts and under his eye from day to day—plans for restoring the city. He seemed to see a man proceeding to take measurements for the laying out of streets and walls. As we often get notice of city improvements by seeing surveyors with theodolite and chain at work, so this man with the measuring line explained that he was going to ascertain the size and capabilities of Jerusalem, and to see what could be made of the ruins. But as he passes on to his work the angel is told to run and stop him and prevent him from measuring the city and planning new walls and fortifications. He is assured that it was

useless marking out boundaries, because the city is destined to exceed all ordinary dimensions and become so great that no walls would be capable of containing it. It will overflow into suburbs, adjoining villages, and even annex the neighbouring towns, so as to present the appearance not of a walled city, but of a densely peopled district. Neither would any danger result from this extra-mural overflow. As Jerusalem had in former times gloried in the strength of her natural position and impregnable fortifications, so now "I," says Jehovah, "will be unto her a wall of fire round about." The expression, a wall of fire, was probably first suggested in the wilderness days by the camp fires which outlying parties used to scare the wild beasts, and it was retained as a vigorous way of expressing an impenetrable defence.

What Nehemiah, who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, made of this prophecy it is impossible to say. It would have been interesting to trace the fortunes of a city which in those days had been bold enough to rely on a spiritual defence and not on fortifications. Certain it is that the walls of Jerusalem were ultimately her destruction; encouraging, as they did, the Jews to make so obstinate a stand against the Romans that an almost unparalleled, if not quite unparalleled, slaughter and misery was the result. But though this part of the prediction was suspended through the unbelief and timidity of the Jews, that part which promised an overflowing population was abundantly fulfilled, the whole land being very soon densely filled with people, and Jerusalem being found too small and confined within the walls built round her.

The unexpected development of Jerusalem is repeated in all well-placed cities. In many old cities, if we wish to see the original town-walls, we must leave the outskirts and walk to almost the heart of the city. The original builders had as little faith as these Jews in the great in-

crease of the population. Municipal corporations in our day must often wish their predecessors in office had seen a little further into the future, or had had some Zechariah among them to warn them of the growth of their city. The provision made by a past generation for the sick, the uneducated, the criminal, the dead and the living, is all found insufficient. The cramped railway stations, the dangerous sewage systems, the meagre water-supply, all teach us how prone men are to act as if what served their turn would serve the future as well. They have in general no regard to the rapid expansion of society; they do not seriously take into account the progress of things.

But the law of this world is progress. And where there is no change there can be no progress. This does not mean that wherever there is change there is progress, that every change is a change for the better. But it means that if we are to fall in with God's law we are to be on the outlook for change and are to be ready to make it with a glad abandonment of the old wherever reason and conscience approve the new. To remain as we are, to believe that what was good enough for our fathers is good enough for us, is to throw away the advantages our fathers won for us and to repudiate the fundamental law of the world. The constant and essential problem of the politician is to adjust the institutions and laws of the country to the growing intelligence, and the growing sense of justice, and the growing wants of the people.

And this is the problem for the Church as well. If the Church cannot look ahead and make provision for growth, she will forego a large part of her function. The Church must take into account that she is destined to be world-wide; and she must therefore beware of running up walls which can only cramp her and retard her expansion and prove that she has no faith in her own living power of growth. She must be such a corporation as can admit

Hindoos, Chinamen, savages. She must not tie herself to any practice which cannot be adopted by all men everywhere. Most religions have made this mistake; they have limited their expansion and made themselves local by demanding belief in what reason rejects or by requiring observance of practices which it is impossible for all men to observe. And Christianity is made local in so far as it is identified with certain practices which it is impossible for some nations or for some persons to adopt; in so far as it is identified with Western forms of thought and with traditions which have grown up during the history of the Church. To make certain forms of worship compulsory, to prohibit divergence from our own creed and from our own habits, is simply to do what is here reprehended; it is to limit the expansion of Christianity, to shut ourselves up within walls of our own building and have little or no share in the extension of true religion. Be comprehensive, be progressive, is the voice of this vision to the Church.

But is there not a danger in this counsel? Is there not a risk that we may be trodden down or corrupted by outsiders if we have not a well-defined and solid wall around us through the gates of which none can pass without strictest scrutiny? Certainly there is a risk. Wherever faith leads, there is a risk. But it remains true that all we really have to rely on is the promise here given: "I will be unto her a wall of fire round about." No subscription of strict creeds, no adhesion to traditional practices, no careful discipline in doctrine and worship will protect the Church; but a right spirit, the spirit of God, will. Nothing but the inhabitation of God in the Church will defend her. The Church has come to resemble ancient Greece, where every town was a state by itself, with laws, customs, and interests of its own. It is with us as with them, a great part of our energy is spent in keeping right our relations with other Churches, in steering our own little Church through the

troubled sea of jealousies, rival schemes and so on. And it will be well if the end is not also similar, if we do not so bite and devour one another that we become an easy prey to the common foe. Sound creeds, reasonable forms of worship, wholesome practices, are all most useful, but they become worse than useless when they separate us in spirit from our fellow Christians, and are depended upon for defence.

The great increase of population here predicted was to arise partly from the return of a larger number of Jews from Babylon. Very significant are the urgent appeals that were found necessary to move them to return. "Flee from the land of the north. Deliver thyself, O Zion that dwellest with the daughter of Babylon." They had to be warned even that punishment was to fall on Babylon, and that they would share in it if they did not escape. For people are always apt to get hardened to that deserted and distant condition into which God banishes them for their sin. The want of high spiritual communings which at first a man mourned over he gradually gets used to. The gaiety and dissipation which were distasteful to him, he can at last scarcely abandon. The cessation from Christian work, which at first he recognised as an infliction, he becomes so used to that it frets and hardens him to resume it. Just as the child who is banished into another room is at first wild with misery, but very speedily begins to find amusement there and is sorry to be recalled.

And as the conquering troops of Darius would make no distinction between Jew and Babylonian, but would slay indiscriminately—so the common visitations and disasters that wait upon wrong-doing make no nice distinctions between those who profess themselves of the world and those who assume to be something better. Men often promise themselves impunity while engaging in sins which they know commonly bring consequences much to be

dreaded, and they cherish this expectation of impunity on the ground that though sinners who boldly follow such courses are punished, yet they themselves are not such men. But they are awakened out of this dream by the sharp blow of natural law. Commercial distress makes no distinction between the man who has overdriven his business on avowedly worldly principles and the man who has over-s Speculated while he has also nursed himself in the belief that he is a child of God. He may be a child of God, but if this fact did not prevent him behaving like a man of the world it will not prevent him suffering as men of the world suffer. A parent may pray for his children, may teach them much Christian truth, and may lay the flattering unction to his soul that they will turn out well; but if he does not see that they learn to love duty more than pleasure, and if he does not by his own life show them that duty is more than pleasure, he will find himself involved in the consequences which always result from neglect and half-discharged responsibilities. Natural law, in short, is no respecter of persons, and utterly disregards the professions we make and the fancies in which we dream our life away. Justice is blind, and weighs deeds irrespective of the person who has thrown them into her scale.

In closing this prophecy Zechariah encourages the people to expect that not only would Jerusalem be filled to overflowing with their kinsmen, but that God would dwell there. But the prediction runs on in language which seems too magnificent for any contemporary events: "Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be My people." This is characteristic of Old Testament prophecy. It is always occasioned by some present need of the generation among whom the prophet lives, but the language employed seems larger than the occasion requires. Prophets did not arise in quiet times, when there was no special call for warning or encouragement or instruction. They ap-

peared in emergencies and spoke of matters within the view of those they addressed. Zechariah speaks of the rebuilding of the Temple that was lying half-built before the eyes of the people; he speaks of that very Jerusalem in which they lived and from which they dated their letters. And regarding these well-known objects he makes explicit and intelligible statements.

But the Church of Zechariah's time was immature, and the events among which he lived were only the prelude and preparation for the far greater events which were to signalize the Church's maturity; and as the prophet looked forward to the triumph of his people over present misfortunes he could not fail to catch a glimpse of the perfect triumphs which were destined to be won by the perfected Church. Under the forms and appearances present to any one generation there lay truths and principles common to all generations. The Temple was the then-existing form of God's dwelling-place, the temporary expedient for Divine manifestation; but in all generations there is a manifestation of God, though not always a stone temple. And so round the whole circle of things with which God's people had to do. Through those things the prophets were, by God's inspiration, enabled to see the permanent principles which operated in them, and in speaking of the visible and familiar objects they therefore often used language which was verified not in those very objects and events then present, but only in the ultimate, highest forms which those principles and ideas were to assume.

The comprehensive promise which seemed to augur all good to Jerusalem in Zechariah's time was this: "I will dwell in the midst of thee." Beyond this, indeed, no promise can at any time go. If God dwells with us because He loves us and seeks our presence, this implies that all good will be ours. Only the most unreasonable of the Jews could have said within themselves: "God must do more

than this. This will not bring us the substantial benefits we need." What can God do more than come and share with us? What else can He promise in order to encourage us? What more can He do than bring Himself? And if it would have been unreasonable in the Jews to murmur, what must we say of murmuring now after the promise has been fulfilled in a manner which beforehand none could dare to anticipate? Are we to live as if this promise were yet unfulfilled? Are we to make no response, no acknowledgment? Is the fact of His Presence to excite no hope, no ambition, no craving for the Divine? Are we to go on through life practically saying, "What about it; what though God does love me? It is nothing to me though His love for me does draw Him to live with me." If so, we wait in vain for any more encouraging fact to enter our life. In this alone have we all that we need to balance and guide our life. To live as in a world from which God can never pass away, this is the key to happiness and energy.

MARCUS DODS.

THOUGHTS.

1. **Jesus never Sleeping in a Walled Town.**— "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out," is written over every day and night of the life of Christ. There never lived so open a man, so accessible always to all. Sitting at the well of Sychar, and talking freely to the first comer; receiving Nicodemus by night; listening to the Syro-Phœnician mother, who breaks through His concealment; preaching to the five thousand, who disturb His retirement,—He is the property of every man that wants Him, and leaves us an example to follow His steps. Yet His command to us, "Enter into thy closet, shut thy door, pray to the Father in secret"—suffer no man, no business, no allurements, to keep you from the secret place of prayer—was singularly observed by Himself.