

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of ZECHARIAH

The background of the three post-exilic prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, is found, as we have seen, in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Haggai, whose prophecy we studied in last month's Notes, prophesied in the second year of Darius, which was 520 BC. Zechariah, to whose prophecy we now turn, began prophesying in the same year, in the eighth month, that is, between the second and third utterances of Haggai (cf Haggai 2:1,10).

Zechariah's prophecy falls into two parts, chapters 1-8 and chapters 9-14. The first eight chapters have reference to the time of the rebuilding of the Temple; the latter chapters are in the main apocalyptic. In the first section, the following outline will help us in our study:

- 1:1-6 Introductory
- 1:7-6:8 Eight visions (2nd year of Darius)
- 7:1-8:23 Questions and answers (4th year of Darius).

Haggai and Zechariah were both ministers of hope and encouragement to the people of God, but whereas Haggai's word had immediate application to one particular situation, Zechariah's is broader and wider and more comprehensive; it takes up indeed the whole purpose and point of the rebuilding of the Temple in the unfolding strategy of God in the world. In Zechariah's prophecy, wider horizons open up.

1) 1:1-6

The significance of this introductory statement is that in it Zechariah interprets the part of his people in the light of God's Word. God was displeased with their fathers (2), and His Word, neglected and despised, overtook them in judgment (6). 'Therefore', says the prophet, 'do not follow their footsteps, but turn to God with all your hearts'. There are two things here to note: Zechariah had understanding of the times and of history, and could read its lessons. Also, he was able to speak realistically to the people, even bluntly, as if to say: 'It would be more to the point, instead of letting your zeal flag and becoming downhearted and discouraged, to look at the past, not to bemoan all its greatness, but to see what happened to your forbears, and try to avoid falling into the very same pitfalls as they did, and bringing on yourselves the judgment they brought on themselves'.

Here is realism indeed! How slow we are to learn the lessons of history, and how grateful we should be when God raises up someone who can read and interpret these lessons to us! Blunt realism can be encouraging, in spite of its starkness, if only we can take it. The trouble is, we are so often simply not prepared to face up to blunt truth and realism. But when we do, it is healthful and invigorating.

2) 1:7-17

These verses record the first of Zechariah's visions. A word about the nature of the visions in general may be helpful. In each case, certain conditions are described, and side by side with these conditions, facts are declared which the average man cannot see. This latter is the content of the Lord's word in those situations and conditions (see G. Campbell Morgan).

The first vision is dated as having been given in the eleventh month; that is to say, four months had passed since Haggai had prophesied that God would shake the heavens and the earth. But that promise of deliverance was not yet forthcoming, and disappointment was natural. And to this situation of disappointment and discouragement, this vision came. It is the vision of a majestic rider on a red horse, in an obscure myrtle grove, accompanied by other riders. These represent the angels of the Lord. Their mission is explained: they are God's scouts to survey the whole earth. The world, they report, lies quiet, that is, the shaking of the heavens and earth is not yet begun (8-11). Then comes the question, 'How long, O Lord....?' And the prophet hears 'good and comfortable words' (13-17). The nations, the angel indicates, have done more to God's people than God empowered them to do, and their actions have changed His wrath to pity (15, 16). In pity, He is returned to His people, and Jerusalem shall be rebuilt and overflow with prosperity. It is an assurance that, in spite of their depressed and sad condition, the angel of the Lord stands in the midst of the covenant people, with His ministering hosts ready to go forth in their defence.

3) 1:7-17

If our interpretation of the vision given in yesterday's Note is valid, then we may say that the vision is one like that given to John on Patmos, when he was anxious about the welfare of the churches from which he had been exiled. The Lord was in the midst of the seven candlesticks, just as that same Presence was with the returned exiles in their discouragement.

The words 'in the bottom' in 8 are variously rendered in the modern translations as 'in the valley', 'in the hollow', 'in the glen'. G. Campbell Morgan prefers the RV margin rendering 'in the shady place', and construes the meaning to be that Israel is in the day of her overshadowing -yet she is watched over by God. One recalls James Russell Lowell's well-known words, 'Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own'. This is indeed a parable of all Israel's history down the ages, in the purpose and providence of God. Outcast from privilege and position, yet never forgotten by their covenant God, and still His care. How comforting to know (10) that He keeps watch over all the events of the earth, and that His almighty Hand controls them!

4) 1:18-21

The second vision, recorded in these verses, is relatively simple. The four horns represent all Israel's enemies, who have oppressed and scattered them. The people were conscious of the weapons that were being forged against them, and the prophet here reveals to them the unseen weapons of the Lord of hosts, ready to destroy these destroying powers. It is not merely that the Lord will raise up instruments of His purposes, but that He has them at hand, ready to go into service for Him. Though enemies might rise on every side to assail His people, God has always an adequate - more than adequate - defence prepared for them. One readily thinks of the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:13ff, when the young man's eyes were opened to see the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire around the prophet. God is always as ready as that, when His people need His protection. The enemy does not catch Him out, or find Him unprepared. One wonders whether there is anything particularly symbolic in the 'carpenters' or 'smiths' or 'craftsmen' in 20. Does the word suggest 'builders', and is there a suggestion in it of the work that the returned exiles were to be engaged in? If so, it may just possibly be that it was to be in the act of continuing the work in face of the opposition that they would experience the delivering power of the Lord and the overruling of their enemies. Whether this be so or not, there is great encouragement here for hard-pressed saints. So often we find ourselves in a situation in which we simply cannot see any way out of the impasse; but then God says, 'Ah, but let me now show you this'. He draws aside the veil, and shows us the one great circumstance, the reality and sufficiency of His divine grace and powers. O for eyes ever to see the unseen! 'Open mine eyes, that I may see'.

5) 2:1-5

The third vision, that of the man with the measuring line bears the message that Jerusalem was to be restored beyond all the bounds of its former glory. The 'measurer' here is obviously thinking in terms of the measurement of the former temple and city, and has narrow, circumscribed ideas of what the city should be. But the city is not to be built on the old lines. Not, however, that we should belittle the mere fact of rebuilding as such. It is something, after all, that there should be this new confidence about building at all, and that they should be convinced that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. All the same, it is easy to hold on to pre-conceived ideas, and to lay down old guidelines for God, prescribing the way He will work in our generation. But God is not bound by the past, and it is no problem to Him to launch out into new ways - indeed, He keeps saying, 'Behold, I will do a new thing' - still, indeed, a work of His grace, but not conforming to old patterns. We must beware of limiting the Holy One of Israel by requiring Him to fit into the pattern of a bygone age! One thinks of the hitherto unheard of expedience of preaching in the open air in Wesley's time, and how aghast people were by such an innovation. But that is how God revitalised the eighteenth century. He has no vested interest in buildings, as such - this is what the vision says here, in effect - and even if it seems risky or dangerous to have a city without walls (4), we must still allow God His freedom, and not be afraid to trust Him. We can almost see the Lord smiling and saying, 'Dangerous - when I am there?' When we put it like that, we see how ludicrous it is!

6) 2:6-13

This section does not seem to belong to the vision described in 2:1-5, but stands distinct from it. In the original it is written in verse form, as distinct from the visions, which are in prose. And yet, it is possible to see a connection with what precedes it, which makes it 'belong' in the spiritual sense. The third vision has just proclaimed that God was to do a new thing in these days. And here, an appeal is made to the rest of the exiles still in Babylon and the east to come back to Israel and throw in their lot with those who had already returned. And the incentive is just this fact that God was about to do a new thing. In this regard, the passage is reminiscent of some of the glorious passages in Isaiah 40-55. The AV rendering of 8 is less than clear, and should probably be taken to mean 'With an eye to His glory (or, with a concern for His glory) He has sent me....' It is God's warning to those who do despite to His covenanted people that they continue to restrain them at their peril. In 9, 10, the words 'I come' do not really contradict what is said in the first vision (1:16). It is true that God had already come to the returned exiles in Jerusalem, but this is a promise that He would come in even greater power, as if to say: 'My coming thus far has not exhausted My potential: I have blessed you thus far, but I will bless you far more'. We should bear in mind when this word was spoken between the first return of exiles under Zerubbabel, and later returns under Ezra and Nehemiah. The picture is of those still in exile perhaps hesitating and irresolute, holding back and wondering whether to commit themselves to so hazardous an undertaking. And Zechariah calls on them to cast in their lot with the people of God, on the basis of the 'new thing' that God was going to do. What a lesson for today!

7) 3:1-10

This is a wonderful passage, with much rich teaching in its general application. Nevertheless, it is important to see first its immediate significance in the context of the returned exiles' situation, for it was to them that it came first as a message from God. After all, Joshua the high priest is the contemporary figure of the time. We need therefore to go back to the situation to which Haggai and Zechariah were prophesying in the second year of Darius, 520 BC. It is the story (Ezra 5, 6) of how the work of rebuilding the Temple was hindered and brought to a standstill by the enemies of the Jews, who wrote letters to the king accusing the Jews of subversive activities. The king heeded the accusations and forbade any further building. Then the prophets came and stirred the people to begin again. Again the enemies of the Jews wrote to the king, and in the same terms, but this time Darius's reaction was very different, and the result was that the Jews were vindicated against their enemies, who were obliged by the king to give the Jews all help and assistance.

Now, what we are meant to take from the vision here is that it represents the real story behind the situation facing the exiles. It was Satan, the adversary, who was resisting their work, through the Samaritans. And the Lord had rebuked Satan, breaking the resistance, setting it at naught. This is the real story of the victory here. Darius sent a reply favourable to the Jews because the Lord had rebuked Satan and broken his power in the situation. And that rebuke had been administered in the context of the preaching of the word by the prophets. This is how God administers His rebukes to Satan - when He raises up a ministry of the Word. And this was revealed to the people through the prophet as an encouragement to go on and not be discouraged any more, but to endeavour to complete the work of rebuilding.

8) 3:1-10

It is not difficult to see what a tremendous encouragement such a message must have been to the people. Here they were, struggling on with the building after the initial impetus that came through Haggai's ministry had begun to falter, and discouragement was again tending to set in. It is as if Zechariah were saying, 'Don't you know that this is what has happened, that these are the facts of the situation? Recognize it to be so, and venture out upon it. Victory is in our hands. The Lord is on our side.' A wonderfully encouraging and reassuring message indeed! Nor is its application in a gospel setting difficult to make, for this is what has happened in the cross and resurrection of Christ. By His death and rising again the Lord has rebuked Satan, and broken his dark rule and power:

Our Lord Christ hath risen!
The tempter is foiled,
His legions are vanquished,
His strongholds are spoiled,

The parable of binding the strong man, then spoiling his house is very relevant here. It was on this basis that the early Church went forward, with the consciousness of an enemy rebuked and spoiled. One thinks of the great prayer meeting recorded in Acts 4:24-31, in which the apostles precisely took their stand on these glorious realities, and won through to victory. That notable passage in the early history of the Church stands in direct line of descent from Zechariah's vision, and it invites us to go and do likewise!

9) 3:1-10

There is another lesson that we may learn from this vision: it is that in any particular spiritual work we must recognize Satan's wiles and influence, and plead the victory of the Cross against him, asking God to repeat the rebuke once-for-all given, that is, apply its virtue to the particular case concerned. The pattern, therefore, must be: first of all apprehension; know the situation, and the fact that Christ has won the victory; then appropriation, by the obedience of faith. What a tremendous thought, in the context of the preaching of the gospel, that as one ministers the Word, preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, there should be arising from many hearts the silent cry, 'Lord, say it again: 'The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan', and set his wiles at nought'. Surely this is the weapon that is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. The preaching of the Word is what is seen and visible: but this is what takes place in the unseen realm, this is the wrestling in the heavenly places of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 6, and which gives that Word free course in the hearts and lives of men.

10) 3:1-10

The illustration that the vision gives is of the gospel mystery of justification. The Shorter Catechism defines justification as 'an act of God's free grace wherein He pardoneth all our sins and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone!' This is the twofold reality which the vision illustrates: the pardon of sin is represented here by the taking away of the filthy garments; while the imputation of Christ's righteousness is the giving of the new garments, the change of raiment. In the vision and in Christian life alike, this twofold grace is seen to be the act of God, the divine pronouncement, and is something instantaneous. As the Catechism says, it is 'an act of God's free grace'. And the vision underlines something else of great importance: it is done in the presence of a Satan who has been rendered powerless to resist through the divine rebuke in the death and resurrection of Christ. A Christian, then, is one who is dressed in borrowed raiment. The garments of another are the garments in which alone we can stand before God. But when we are thus clothed in the righteousness of Christ, then when God looks on us, He sees - not our sin, but His righteousness. As the hymn puts it, God only looks on us as found in Him. One thinks of the wonderful allegory in Pilgrim's Progress, when Christian came to the cross and his burden rolled away, and the shining ones came to him, the first saying 'Thy sins be forgiven thee', the second stripping him of his rags and clothing him with a change of raiment, and the third setting a mark upon his forehead. How true Bunyan is to the biblical insights!

11) 3:1-10

We return to Zechariah's visions. There are one or two further points to clear up before leaving this chapter. In 7 the AV 'places to walk among those that stand by' is rendered by the RSV thus: 'I will give you the right of access among those that are standing here'. What is being promised is, quite simply, a voice at the throne of God, through obedience! In 8, 'men wondered at' is rendered 'men of good omen' in the RSV. The meaning appears to be something like this: 'You and the men who are with you, Joshua, are strategic men in My sovereign purposes in the world; you cannot know just now what place you have in my purposes, or what part you have to play; but walk in obedience, and that part will be fulfilled. For in the fulness of the time, I will bring forth My servant, the Branch....' Zechariah, then, is enabled to see behind the immediate activities to the purpose of God in them - the building of the Temple was not an end in itself, but rather part of the 'cradle' in which the Messiah should be born. The vision means that God draws aside the veil and says, 'Look, this is what I plan and purpose to do: try to see your part in the whole, and determine to play it with all your might'. Some think the stone in 9 refers to Christ, others to the finished Temple; but it may simply have a reference to the building materials with which the Temple was to be built. If so, Zechariah is saying that God's eyes would be upon these stones, that is, He would have a special care for the rebuilding of the Temple - not as an end in itself, but in view of what it was to mean for the future - and would never take His eyes off it till His purpose respecting it and them was accomplished. And that is encouragement indeed, for those conscious of being taken up by Him for His service!

12) 4:1-7

Joshua, for whom the last vision was given, was the religious leader of the returned exiles; but they had a civil leader also - Zerubbabel, and now the prophet has a word for him. Zechariah sees a golden candlestick, with bowl on top, seven lamps with pipes feeding the lamps with oil from two olive trees one on either side of the candlestick. The prophet gives a fourfold message to Zerubbabel from this: 'not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord' (6); the mountain becoming a plain(7); an assurance about finishing the work (9); and finally a warning not to despise the day of small things (10). This is to say, it is a word to Zerubbabel about the work in which he was engaged, and to which he was committed. From this we can gather that the candlestick vision represents the nature of that work, and its point. That is where we must begin in our thinking about the vision before us in these verses, and we shall turn to it in some detail in the next Note.

13) 4:1-7

In the Old Testament Tabernacle, described in Exodus, we have the seven-branched candlestick alongside the Table of Shewbread, in the holy place. In our studies in that book, we saw how it typified and spoke of Christ as the light of the world. The thought here, however, is not the same, although closely connected. Here, the candlestick represents the people of God who are set in the midst to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. This was God's calling for them, and their vocation, in the world. In this respect - and this is the connection with the earlier candlestick - they were there to prepare the way for the light of the world to come. This was the purpose in their having been brought back from exile - not merely that that generation might be comforted and have their heart's desire, but also that the divine purposes might be furthered and fulfilled. It is of this calling, and of this furthering of the divine purposes, that the vision says in unmistakable terms: 'The light will shine, and the darkness will not put it out!' Here, then, is the responsibility of the people - to shine in the darkness. And God, in this encouragement to Zerubbabel, assures them that the resources for shining are always more than sufficient. The vision, therefore, said two things to Zerubbabel: a light would be established in the post-exilic community of Jerusalem; and - what is more - that light would have all the resources needed to keep it shining and to fulfil its purpose. One can readily see how such a vision can have many different applications, but in its context, its message to Zerubbabel was that despite all difficulties and oppositions, however mountainous, the work would be established and the purpose of God fulfilled.

14) 4:1-7

Let us next consider the actual words spoken in the vision to Zerubbabel. First of all, 'not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord' (6). The context of these words is important for a true understanding of them. The candlestick was being fed from the two olive trees. It was a supernatural operation, and it is clearly meant to indicate that its continuous shining was due to supernatural causes. No human resources could do it, but the divine resources were there, and available. 'Lean on Me, Zerubbabel', says God. 'So shall the work be done'. In Israel's pre-exilic days, human might and power did figure very largely in their situation; but it is very striking to realise that when the people of God returned to their own land, they did not come back with force of arms, or as a militarily strong people: they returned as a spiritual people with a spiritual heritage. That was the difference, and that, henceforth, was to be the difference.

The second word, in 7, about the mountain, echoes the words in Isaiah 49:11, 'I will make all my mountains a way'. This is the promise that God gives to Zerubbabel. When one thinks of the mountainous difficulties spoken of in the earlier chapters of Ezra, and the discouragement that clutched at the hearts of the returned exiles, one realises the greatness of such a word. The reference to the headstone in 7b seems to be taken up and explained in 9; if so, then the meaning is that Zerubbabel will so completely see the mountain of difficulty removed by God that he will be able to put the headstone, that is, the finishing touch, to the Temple building. What an assurance to a hard-pressed and faltering leader!

15) 4:8 14

The third word given to Zerubbabel was that he would finish the work committed to him. There are two points to note here; on the one hand, we must recognize that Zerubbabel had only a part to play in the divine purposes. No one ever has more than a part to play; and none can hope to see all God's purposes brought to fruition - these come only at His appointed time. Some have to die in faith, not having received the promises; some labour, and others enter into their labours. On the other hand, it is ever to be a burden to a spiritual man that he should not fail in the part committed to him. It is this assurance that is given to Zerubbabel; his particular share in the ongoing purposes of God was to see to the rebuilding of the Temple, and God indicates here that no power on earth would be allowed to prevent him from fulfilling it.

The fourth word, 10, concerns 'the day of small things'. The meaning should be taken as saying that no one who hopes to accomplish, or does accomplish, anything great, despises the day of the small things. The fact that Zerubbabel has the plummet in his hand indicates that his work is being done, and - however small and insignificant it may seem in itself - this is the token and evidence that God's sovereign purposes are in process of being fulfilled. Furthermore, the phrase 'with those seven' indicates that the Spirit of God is also at work in it, and it will therefore be brought to completion in due time. Hence the rejoicing; happy is the man, who, looking at the small, insignificant part, can discern in that the much larger whole!

16) 4:8-14

One further point in the vision now remains to be cleared up: the meaning of the two olive trees, on either side of the candlestick. The answer given is that they are the two anointed ones (14). This is not further explained to Zerubbabel, and it would seem that he must have known who they were. The opinion of the commentators is generally agreed that they are Joshua and Zerubbabel, the religious and civil leaders of the people. If so, then clearly the oil from God is channelled through them to the candlesticks to give continued light. This is important, in that it signifies that the divine supplies of grace come through the anointed and appointed channels. It is salutary for us to see this emphasis on duly-appointed 'ministers' of God, and to recognize that Scripture sets much store by it, especially in a day when much impatience is often expressed about the place of an ordained ministry as such. It has been pointed out that there is no mention of the prophets as being mediators of that grace, and G. Adam Smith maintains that this is a clear indication that in Israel prophecy had spent itself. But this can hardly be true when one thinks of the ministry of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and the effect they had on the life of the nation. Rather, it is the leaders that are in view, and it is natural that Joshua and Zerubbabel should be in mind in particular. 'The message is that the Lord would in future bestow upon His congregation the organ of His Spirit, and maintain them in such direct connection with it, that it would be able to let its light shine with sevenfold brilliancy' (Delitzsch).

17) 5:1-4

Some commentators take the vision of the flying roll and that of the woman in the ephah (in 5ff) as belonging together and constituting one vision; others think they are separate visions, with different, but related messages. We will content ourselves with an exposition of the first picture in this Note. The prophet sees a flying roll or scroll, which, he is told, represents 'the curse that giveth forth over the face of the earth'. This is explained as being a judgment on thieves and false swearers. The vision stands in sequence with those that preceded it, in the sense that, after the religious and political obstacles hindering Israel's future have been removed, - represented in the word to Joshua in chapter 3 and that to Zerubbabel in chapter 4 - the land itself must be purged and cleansed of its wickedness. There seems to be some association of ideas also with the candlestick vision, for, after all, when God's people are shining for Him, as He means them to, the power of His Word is ever at work convicting and convincing of sin, In time of spiritual awakening, when the Spirit of grace is abroad in the Church, a tremendous conviction of sin comes upon the ungodly, and the word of God, as it were, enters into this door and that, exposing sin, convicting and cleansing, and bringing newness of life. This, then, as Zechariah sees in the vision, is the purpose of God with His people: moral pollution must be purged, and sin has to be dealt with; it cannot be allowed to remain (cf Ezra 9, 10).

18) 5:5-11

The second part of the vision (if second part it is) shows a woman seated within an ephah (a round, barrel-like vessel of seven gallons capacity), and the ephah is borne away, with the woman sealed inside it by a weight of lead. The figure is really a continuation of the thought expressed in 1-4, and has reference again to God's dealing with sin. Not content with atonement for sin, or the legal punishment of crime, sin itself, in its living power, must also be banished from Israel. The woman is the personification of wickedness, and represents the principle of sin that is to be dealt with. As such, this is the climax of a process that has been unfolded in the fourth, sixth and seventh visions: ritual atonement and cleansing, as represented in 3:1ff, legal punishment of crime, as represented in 5:1-4, and now the living power of sin broken. In the gospel, this three-fold progression is evident also: guilt expiated brings peace with God; atonement restores fellowship with God, and when the power of sin is broken, this brings life from God.

We should bear in mind the general context of these visions: God has come to His servants in a time of discouragement, when mountains of difficulty have been pressing down upon them, and assured them (in the 'candlestick' vision) that His light will shine and that the work will be done. And with the encouragement, there comes the urgent exhortation to have done with all that might hinder these sovereign purposes from being fulfilled, and to put away all that might grieve His Spirit and frustrate His work. This is the point that is being made.

19) 6:1-8

The eighth and final vision speaks of the judgments with which God will visit the nations which have oppressed and wronged Israel. Zechariah sees four chariots with horses of different colour. They are the four spirits (or winds) of heaven commissioned by God and despatched by Him to fulfil His will against the powers that threaten His people. We should compare this with the first vision, where the overthrow of the nations was spoken of as not yet begun. Here, we see that work of overthrow beginning to take place. The directions they are each given are significant: the black horses go north, where the Babylonian/Persian menace threatened; in the south there was Egypt, always a possible candidate for world power: G.A. Smith suggests that the phrase in 6, 'the white go forth after them' should read 'westwards', and this is taken as the true rendering in the RSV, which has 'towards the west country', a reference to Europe and the Greek power very soon to arise, under Alexander the Great. None are sent eastward, which may indicate that no threat was evident from that quarter at the time. The horses of the fourth chariot (7) are to patrol the whole earth, probably referring to any other possible enemy that might arise to threaten God's people. It is a grim but comforting picture of the completeness of the divine protection surrounding Israel, and one well calculated to assure Zerubbabel and his companions at that particular juncture. God's word is nothing if not to the point!

20) 6:9-15

The series of visions closes with what must be regarded as a symbolic transaction 'which is closely connected with the substance of the night-visions, and sets before the eye the figure of the mediator of salvation, who, as crowned high priest, or as priestly king, is to build the kingdom of God, and raise it into a victorious power over all the kingdoms of this world, for the purpose of comforting and strengthening the congregation' (Delitzsch). Again we have the idea of the Branch (cf 3:8). Joshua is to be crowned with a crown made from the presents of silver and gold brought by messengers to Jerusalem who had come from Babylon bringing gifts for the support of the ongoing work (10, 11, 14, 15). Yet, Joshua is not himself the Branch, but only the shadow of one to come, who will build the Temple of God (the spiritual edifice) in the future. Zechariah is therefore giving expression to the fulfilment of the real purposes of God in bringing the exiles back to their own land and rebuilding the material Temple. He is seeing the significance of the work in which he is engaged in the light of the fulfilment of the divine purpose to bring forth a Redeemer to accomplish the world's redemption. This is the measure of the prophet's depth of vision in his situation.

21) 6:9-15

The phrase at the end of 13 is difficult, and commentators are doubtful as to its meaning. If we take the general meaning of the passage as having both an immediate and an ultimate reference, then the words will have a twofold reference, first to Zerubabel and Joshua, on the one hand, in relation to the harmony that would exist between them; and then - to what, in the corresponding ultimate reference? Not so much between Christ and God, as might be thought (an awkward, and indeed unnecessary thought, since the unity of the Godhead needs no emphasis), but simply that the Messiah, who unites in Himself both royalty and priesthood, will counsel and promote the peace of His people. In 15b we should note the strong ethical emphasis in the prophecy: 'This shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God'. That is to say, the key to everything was to be obedience; without obedience, they would fail in their opportunity and responsibility to play their part in the purposes of God. There is a lesson in symbol for Christians in all this: it is when evil is cleansed away, and a new obedience becomes the pattern of our lives, that God arises on our behalf, and His purposes furthered towards fruition in us and through us. This is the practical import of the vision for us.

22) 7:1-7

The visions are now over, but the Lord still speaks to the people through the prophet. A word of explanation is necessary about the fasts mentioned in 3 and 4 (cf also 8:19 for the full list). A deputation of Jews raised the question of the continuance of the great fasts of the Exile. Should they still be observed by the people, now that they were back again in the land? The fasts all marked outstanding points in Israel's national disaster: that of the fourth month commemorated the opening of the gates of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 39:2, 3); that of the fifth month the burning of the temple and city; that of the seventh month the assassination of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:22-25); that of the tenth month the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Throughout the captivity, they had bewailed their disaster, and commemorated it by these fasts; and now that the exile was over, they were asking whether these fasts should be continued. Zechariah's answer is full of significance. Were these fasts during the exile unto God he asks? The implication is shattering: they were simply observances without meaning, outward ceremonial and no more, and now the people were in danger once again of falling into precisely the error that had been the downfall of the people before the captivity, and that had led to it. The very fact that they were now asking whether to continue with them was evidence to the prophet that they were 'losing the place', and allowing themselves to be gripped by a meaningless tradition, and he utters a solemn and serious warning against such an attitude. More of this in the next Note.

23) 7:8-14

The ethical thrust of Zechariah's challenge to the people is couched in terms reminiscent of the blunt and forthright utterances of the pre-exilic prophets Amos and Micah (9, 10) and Isaiah. The latter's biting and blistering words in 1:11ff are indeed an eloquent parallel. It is solemn to think that they could have passed through such a trial as the captivity without really realising on any deep level what it was all about, and without there being much change in their attitude. God's real word to the people then, before the exile, as now, in the post exilic situation, was ethical, not ceremonial, and this was what they should be listening to. The import of 9ff is that this is what the earlier prophets had taught; and that it was because the people had refused to listen that God had sent 'great wrath' upon them (11). The lesson is surely clear: Do not, cries the prophet, fall into this error again: beware of the danger that such a misunderstanding of God's word brings. Put away the fasts which the exile made necessary, and address yourselves to the business of practising the neglect of which had led to the exile in the first place. Nothing - not ritual observance, not sacrifice, not prayer even - can ever be a substitute for holy living and obedience to the word and will of God. How faithfully did Zechariah stand in the tradition of the earlier prophets.

24) 8:1-5

This chapter continues and amplifies the message of the previous one, as we may gather from 19, where the prophet announces that the fasts of the exile shall give way to joy and gladness. It contains many lovely and moving words. The first prophecy starts with an expression of God's love for His people, by which restoration was to be effected and brought to fruition. 'City of truth' (3) picks up once again the ethical emphasis of the previous chapter and it stands, by implication, over against the idea of a 'city of ceremonial'. The promise of old men and women dwelling in the streets of Jerusalem and children running about therein is a very wonderful one, and would certainly have been for the community in the holy city. The first returned exiles would have been chiefly men who were young or in middle life. The exigencies of the situation and the hazards of the time would allow few to reach old age. As G. Adam Smith points out, 'it was a rough and hard society, unblessed by the two benedictions of life, childhood and old age'. The promise, therefore, was of the rehabilitation of a true humanity, undergirt by truth and justice, which alone can make real life possible, and which can establish a real sense of community and caring and above all a reverence for life. Doubtless this is, in the ultimate sense, a vision for the future, but even now, where the gospel is having its way, some at least of these blessed lineaments can be seen in the oneness of the body of Christ, where old and young have their place and play their part. Would that there were more and more evidence of this, wherever Christ's name is spoken!

25) 8:6-8

The very wonder of such a vision (1-5) might well make any people feel that it was almost too good to be true, and the Lord seems to anticipate such a reaction in 6 when He indicates that it is not too much for Him to do. How often He must need to say this to us who so doubt His word of promise and fail to rise in faith to claim it! 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' said the Lord to Abraham (Genesis 18:14). This is the spirit expressed in the words of 6, which is followed by an even greater promise, in which the mingling of the near and the far must surely be discerned. The deliverance of the people from the bondage of Babylon had of course already begun, with the return of the first exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua, but more were to come later, first under Ezra and then under Nehemiah. But if there is an apocalyptic note in these verses, as many reverent commentators hold, the returns of those days do not exhaust such a promise, which must be held as referring ultimately to the glories of the messianic kingdom established by Christ. This does not mean that Zechariah's words could have no immediate application to the exiles of those days: indeed, as we have already seen, Zechariah was able to see the significance of all that was happening in his own day in the context of the larger redemptive purposes of God, and it could not be anything but encouragement for the people also to see that they were involved in something greater than their own immediate restoration.

26) 8:9-17

The historical background of 9 and 10 is surely the circumstances outlined in Haggai 1 and 2 - in 10 the fact that the people were not being true to the Lord in the complacency that had gripped them, and in 9 the prophetic exhortation that had come to them on their repentance. That exhortation is now repeated by Zechariah, and elaborated, with many gracious assurances to the people. Two things stand out very clearly: one is the strong ethical note in the exhortation, especially in 16 and 17, a reminder of how absolutely the blessings of the covenant expect and require right living from those who receive its blessings (an emphasis that we have seen markedly in our current studies in Deuteronomy). The other thing is that these verses represent the fruition on the long discipline of God's dealings with them. In Haggai 2:10ff what the prophet stressed was the long uphill struggle back to wholeness and prosperity - it would not come in a few days! - and the patience they would need to wait for that ultimate renewal. Now, in 13-15, we learn that there is to be an end to that uphill fight. God will do well for Jerusalem and the house of Judah. This is a word of timeless encouragement to all who are battling on in God's work, seeing very little to hearten them, and it says to them, 'Fear not, the best is yet to be!' And if we hold fast to the end, we need not doubt that this will be so.

27) 8:18-23

These verses continue further the theme of the previous reading. They give a wonderful picture of the true fulfilment of the purpose of the Jews who have been chosen as the people of God. It is as if Zechariah were reminding the people of why God had made them His people in the first place, and what He had brought them back from exile to Jerusalem for - to fulfil His will and purpose for them to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. One thinks readily of Paul's teaching in Romans 11:11ff, that God has still His purposes with His covenant people, even today, though they be returned to the land in unbelief. And it still remains true that the Jews will always be the best evangelists - think of Paul, and his wonderful ministry in the gospel when he was won to Christ. However, the primary emphasis here is on the Jews in Zechariah's day, and what the prophet is insisting is that when they are returned in true obedience to the Lord they will be taken up and used of Him as instruments of His light and grace. That being said, there are two lessons, by way of application, that can be drawn. One is that this will be true of the Church, the new Israel of God, when she is all that she ought to be in penitence and obedience before God. There is little doubt that in the early history of the Church one of the chief ways in which the gospel spread in ancient society was through the infectious impact of the early Christians' living testimony. Men everywhere heard and saw that God was with them, and they were drawn - irresistibly - to Christ. The other lesson is one of general principle: it is that when a moral lead is given to the world, men will be influenced and will follow that lead. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that the world is waiting, even longing, for that lead - in terms of integrity in public life, in industry, in the professions, on the shop floor. What an opportunity lies before a Church alive to the need of the time!

28) 9:1-8

From this point in Zechariah and in the chapters that follow, the atmosphere is so changed and different that some commentators have thought that they are written by a different hand. The material is, in the main, apocalyptic, often difficult to interpret, like the second part of Daniel, with the 'near' and the 'far' blending and mingling in the same prophecy. The chapters fall into two sections: in 9-11, it is the burden of the word of the Lord in the land of Hadrach, and in 12-14, the burden of the word of the Lord for Israel. Yet, there is probably a deeper, underlying unity in them, that makes it necessary to look at them as a unit, and see their unified message, before going into them in detail. We should remember that we are dealing with apocalypse, and it is the same kind of apocalypse as that in the later chapters of Daniel, and has the same kind of interpretation and application - indeed, the same kind of twofold interpretation - on the one hand, to the immediate future, i.e. the reigns of Alexander the Great and his successors Ptolemy and Antiochus, and on the other hand, to the further future, i.e. the time of Christ's first – and second - coming. Thus, in chapters 9 and 10, there is an oracle against the nations that oppress Israel; they will be destroyed, but Zion will be preserved, and her exiles regathered, and divine blessings showered upon them. Nevertheless (chapter 11), in spite of God's former favours and goodness to her, the nation will reject the Messianic Shepherd, and will thus be forsaken of God, the covenant broken, and will fall at the mercy of oppressor nations again, who will, nevertheless (11:17) be punished for their oppression of Israel. More of this in the next Note.

29) 9:1-8

To continue the summary of these chapters, we are introduced in chapter 12 to a picture in which Jerusalem is vindicated and delivered. God will turn the captivity of His people, and the results of this deliverance will be four-fold - (i) strengthening; (ii) a spirit of repentance; (iii) a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness; (iv) the removal of idolatry. Then (chapter 14) we have a horrific picture of the day of the Lord and the battle of Armageddon: at first the enemies of God shall prevail, then the Lord will appear and the Messianic kingdom shall be established, and worship will be centralised at Jerusalem. Such is the review of these chapters. In all this we shall find an admixture of the 'near' and the 'far', the more immediate future and the further future. Until we grasp the validity of this idea, we will be hard put to understand Old Testament prophecy, for we shall find ourselves repeatedly asking whether this or that refers to a particular point in history, or to a point in the future, when the simple answer is that it refers to both, and for this reason: there are recurring principles and themes in the history of the Jews. For example, the 'rejection' of the 'Shepherd' is a recurring theme. It was the complaint of all the pre-exilic prophets that the people rejected God's appointed servants; and the Jews eventual rejection of Christ simply summed up and actualised and confirmed all their previous history, and was in character with all that had happened in their turbulent and eventful history. This is why apocalyptic can have a multiple interpretation - to the near future, so far as Zechariah was concerned, to the further future, in the time of Christ, and to the real 'end-time' before Christ's second coming.

30) 9:1-8

It is for this reason (expressed at the end of the previous Note) that it is possible for the apostle John to speak of antichrist in his day, and be thinking of Nero, and for Luther and Calvin to think of antichrist as the pope of Rome, and for Christians in the twentieth century to think of Hitler or Stalin. And when one is tempted to say that they cannot all be right, we must put an emphatic question mark against such a statement, and say 'Why not?' They are all right, because antichrist is a recurrent principle in history, and each of these - Nero, the pope, Hitler and Stalin - was in his own way a manifestation of the antichrist principle.

This both complicates prophecy, from one point of view, and also simplifies it, in terms of our understanding of it. We are not permitted to say, of any prophecy, that it means one thing only, for this violates the principles of biblical interpretation. If we grasp this, we will have made a great step forward in understanding the Old Testament Scriptures.

31) 9:1-8

These verses depict events associated with the overthrow of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, along with all the satellite states on the northern seaboard of Palestine. History books of the period tell of Alexander's famous exploits, particularly of the manner in which he took the city of Tyre, building a causeway out to what had been hitherto an impregnable island, and reducing it to rubble. In this respect, these verses repeat what may be read in the earlier, pre-exilic prophets of the Assyrians and, later, the Babylonians, both of whom were raised up in turn to be the rod of the divine anger against God's people for their sins. Only now, it is the other way round, and the godless empires that had done despite to Israel were to be themselves set at nought. It is one of the fascinating features of ancient history to see power passing from one empire to another. As G.A. Smith says, 'In face of Alexander's invasion or of other campaigns on the same line, this oracle repeats the confidence of Isaiah. God rules: His providence awakes. Yahweh hath an eye for mankind, and all the tribes of Israel. The heathen shall be destroyed, Jerusalem rest secure; with a remnant of heathen converted, according to the Levitical notion, by having unclean foods taken out of their mouth.'

32) 9:9-12

These verses are a good example of how near and far mingle in one prophecy. In the earlier verses (1-8) the conqueror envisaged as destroying Israel's enemies is Alexander, but here, the vision enlarges into a true Messianic appearance. The passage is, of course, a well-known one, and is referred to the Lord Jesus in the New Testament, in His entry into Jerusalem. The question that arises here, however, is what these words mean in this particular context. What is the connection with Alexander the Great? Well, it could be just that the prophet is looking out into the distance of future events, to see in one moment judgment on these wicked, godless nations, and in the next to see the King of peace. After all, if Cyrus could be called 'Mine Anointed', could not Alexander be regarded likewise? And is not the word 'Anointed' what 'Messiah' means? And do not judgment and grace belong together, in the economy of God? What Zechariah saw was the unfolding of the divine purposes in the world as they moved towards their fulfilment in Christ, and he recognized that the coming of the King was the culmination of all that the exiles were involved in. And it is when God raises up the emperor to smite the enemies of His people that the way for the Messiah to come is opened. This prophecy, in other words, is the culminating point in Zechariah's previous teaching - always there was the forward look to the 'latter house' which was to be the 'cradle' of the Redeemer.

33) 9:9-12

The terms in 10 are general, referring to the extent and indeed the universality of the messianic kingdom. Disarmament will be the order of the day, because He will speak peace to the nations - the whole mission of Christ in the gospel is designed to this grand end (cf Isaiah 2). The 'near' and the 'far' again mingle in these verses - on the one hand, it is when the Persian empire is destroyed that Israel will know peace and divine protection; on the other hand, it is when the powers of evil, symbolised here by the Persian power, are broken and set at nought by the victory of Christ, that God's people will know peace and victory. The same twofold message applies also in 11 - it is the faithfulness of God to the covenant He made with His people that is the basis of Israel's deliverance, and it is that same faithfulness that undergirds the New Testament gospel of redemption. The metaphor is a graphic one - the 'pit wherein is no water' speaks of the prospect of a terrible and lingering death through thirst, and such is the captive state of God's people - in every age: it was true of the Jews then, it is true of the Jews today, and true of the Church of God. But - they are prisoners of hope, with a sure hope of deliverance, because of the blood of the covenant. God is mindful of that covenant, and because of this, His people will never finally fail. The blood-sealed covenant has preserved the ancient, chosen people, and will likewise preserve all in the Church who call upon His Name.

34) 9:13-17

The vision changes, and now we have a different picture. In the beginning of the chapter the Greek empire was in the ascendant, but now the Jews are being brandished by God as His weapons against Greece. The scholars think that this refers to the Maccabean period, and certainly this prediction was fulfilled then, in that grim and turbulent time, when Antiochus Epiphanes brought such miseries upon God's people. Above and beyond the horrors of warfare, however, there is the note of divine succour and protection in 14, 'The Lord shall be seen over them', 15, 'The Lord of hosts shall defend them', and 16, 'The Lord their God shall save them'. What a wonderful progression! And is it not unchangeably true, in all manner of situations? The two metaphors in 16 are very beautiful - the Lord's flock, and the jewels in His crown - and both alike indicate value that God sets on His people. The flock is precious to the shepherd, and the crown jewels are precious to the king. This, then, is the estimate that God places upon His own. What comfort and encouragement ought this to be to hard-pressed and discouraged saints! 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' Why, indeed!

35) 10:1-4

The theme in 1 is still that of restoration, and of the kind of material and temporal blessing that so often accompanied repentance and renewal. As such the verse belongs to the thought of 9:16, 17. In 2ff reference is made to the recurrent sin of the people of God - idolatry. We sometimes say that Israel wept all the idolatry out of her system by the rivers of Babylon, but this is true only in a general sense. It is clear from the post-exilic literature (Ezra and Nehemiah) that the danger was ever-present, and sometimes was fallen into. There may be a reference in these verses to a further exile of the people, when Ptolemy, one of Alexander's successors, deported large numbers of Jews to Egypt. This, then, would be the 'exile' from which God is to summon them (8). It may well be, therefore, that this further captivity was due to the idolatry to which Israel succumbed yet again, as if God had said to them, 'Have you not learned the lesson of Babylon yet? Very well, back you go into captivity again, until you do learn.'

The general picture presented here is a remarkable one: Israel was constantly surrounded by great world powers, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and later, Rome, and in comparison with them was insignificant, a mere pawn in the great game that was going on in the world. But God manipulated all these great powers in the spiritual and moral interests of His people. When they misbehaved, and transgressed the covenant, they could be sure that some great power would appear on their doorstep to threaten them with extinction; and when they were obedient and loyal, they were, in strange and unaccountable ways, bypassed by these great powers and left in peace. Such is the story of Israel in ancient times, and this prompts the reflection that things are not so very different in the present day. Great, super-powers flank Israel in the twentieth century, and still she survives and maintains her identity, because God wills her to remain in existence!

36) 10:5-12

The sentiments expressed in these verses bear many similarities to the great prophecies of restoration in Isaiah 40 onwards, and serve to remind us that God's grace is unchanging down the generations, and that the various movements of His working at different times are simply illustrations, reflections even, of His great and decisive work of restoration in the gospel. This is why all the various acts of deliverance recorded in Scripture may be taken as tokens of the final, far-off fulfilment of the purposes of God at the end-time. Thus, although 9-12 have as their primary reference the restoration from captivity of those who in Zechariah's day were as yet not restored and returned to the land, they may very legitimately be projected into the future. What is important for us is to grasp the principle which underlies what is said in these chapters. When we do, we have a key to a true understanding of prophecy as a whole. One thinks in this connection of what Paul teaches in Romans 11 about the final restoration of the Jews. Surely it is on the basis of this unchanging principle that the Apostle can say, as he does in Romans 11:1, 'Hath God cast away His people? God forbid...God hath not cast away His people which he foreknew.... And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written....'

37) 11:1-17

The atmosphere of this chapter is entirely different. The picture is of a nation under the displeasure and wrath of God. The question that arises here is what people and what circumstances are being referred to. The answers have been various: there are those, particularly the critical scholars, who confine the reference to the immediate situation, and see nothing more than this in the chapter. Well, we can hardly suppose that what Zechariah writes here had no relevance for his own day or the immediate future, for this is the first meaning of prophecy, that it should be a message to an immediate situation. But this does not and cannot exclude a message also to a further day, and for this reason: what the Jews did to the Chief Shepherd in the fulness of the time was all of a piece with their attitude down their chequered history. When they crucified Christ, they simply confirmed their whole previous history, the history of declension, obstinacy, waywardness and backsliding. This is why a prophecy of this nature can apply - and be applied legitimately - to all sorts of different situations, because the principle is a constant one. We could with equal truth take its message back into their history, and set it alongside the situation in Isaiah's day, or Elijah's and say, 'This is exactly what they did then.' At so many points in their history could it have been said that God had given them unspeakable favours - in face of which they had murmured against the Shepherd that He had given them. That, by way of introduction to the study of the chapter.

38) 11:1-6

The buyers and sellers of the people (5) may refer either to their faithless and corrupt leaders, or to the world powers of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids between whom Israel were exchanged for many years (the supporters of a Maccabaeen reference recall the quick succession of high priests before the Maccabaeen rising (8). Either interpretation would suit the more immediate application of the prophecy. But this does not exclude a more distant fulfilment, and indeed the significant reference to the thirty pieces of silver in 12 is decisive for such an interpretation. What the prophet is seeing, therefore, in apocalyptic vision, is the terrible destruction of the land from north to south by the Roman armies under Vespasian, and his son Titus, in AD 70 - that judgment of which Jesus Himself spoke so solemnly and with tears in His eyes in His own prophetic discourses (cf Mark 13, Matthew 24, 25). Truly, their house was left desolate: and the history of the time (recorded in Josephus' Wars) unfolds the extremities of affliction that came upon them in the judgment of God. Truly, they were a flock destined to slaughter because they rejected the Messiah!

39) 11:7-14

The RSV rendering of 7 reads as follows: 'So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slain for those who trafficked in the sheep...' This makes it even clearer than in the AV that the prophet is now acting a parable or allegory, reminiscent of the acted parables in Jeremiah 23: 1-8 and Ezekiel 34, and 37:24ff. It is a parable of judgment, for although the two staves with which the shepherd herds and guides his flock are Grace and Union, symbolising the depth of the divine covenant favour towards the people, and His desire for them to be one, the two staves are broken because of the people's persistent sinning, and the covenant is annulled and the unity of the nation set at naught. G. Adam Smith comments: 'The principles which underlie this allegory are obvious. God's sheep, persecuted and helpless though they be, are yet obstinate, and their obstinacy not only renders God's good will to them futile, but causes the death of the man who would have done them good. The guilty sacrifice the innocent, but in this execute their doom. That is a summary of Israel's history.'

We should not miss the force of what is said in 12 and 13 about the 'price' set by the people on the worth of the Shepherd's work. This was all they considered it worth. Well might Isaiah say, 'He was despised, and we esteemed Him not!'

40) 11:15-17

The prophet is now commanded to act another parable, and act out the part (with the implements) of a worthless shepherd. The people have refused the good shepherd, and now they must make do with the false and worthless. Doubtless these words proved true in the years immediately following Zechariah's time, but they are even truer of our Lord's, and of the succeeding centuries. The terrible holocaust of AD 70 was but one of many examples of the judgment that have come upon God's people because of their rejection of Christ. All Israel's centuries of woe and oppression stem from this awful rejection. Yet, such is God's care for His people, even in their rejection of Him, that is has gone ill with any and all who have done them despite. Down the centuries God has punished those who have been cruel to His people. If there is anything that is writ large on the pages of history, it is this solemn truth. One would have thought that evil men would have grasped this truth, so frequently has it been demonstrated on the national and international level, but no, men appear to be blind to what stares them in the face; and so they suffer and are set at nought. When the story of the Second World War is finally told, it may yet be seen that Hitler's Germany was brought down and destroyed, not so much because we were on the side of righteousness, but because at the heart of the Nazi oppression there lay their determined onslaught of the Jews. It was that, more than anything else, that sealed their doom.

41) 12:1-7

While the main picture in chapters 9-11 is that of the rejection of the Shepherd-King, and the consequent disaster and judgment falling upon the Jews, from this point onwards in the prophecy, it is that of the vindication and deliverance of God's people, and the destruction of their enemies. Once again, we must recognize that this prophetic writing is in the nature of apocalypse, using weird and frightening imagery to describe events. And, as we have already seen, it is often difficult to distinguish between the 'near' and the 'far', with references to circumstances immediately following Zechariah's day and those to the first and second advents of Christ mingling inextricably. Again, we must insist that it is possible for one prophecy to have more than one fulfilment, for this reason, that sometimes it states a principle in God's dealings with men, which can be legitimately applied to other and later situations. Paradoxically, however, not only does this not ultimately confuse interpretation, it enriches it, to give an authentic and timely word from the Lord to our own day.

42) 12:1-7

There is a certain majesty about the opening of this prophecy: it is the Maker of heaven and earth Who will do these things. It is something for men to have such a God! Jerusalem is to be made a cup of trembling and a burdensome stone to her enemies. The 'cup' metaphor suggests that those who try to swallow Jerusalem down will simply become intoxicated, and reel about helplessly, in confusion. The 'burdensome stone', suggests G. Adam Smith, gives the picture of a ploughman coming on a half-submerged stone in his field, in the way of his furrow, and trying to remove it, but in vain - all he gets is cut and bruised hands. So it is with all who have tried to remove God's people out of their way! And how true this has been down the ages - how true indeed of our own modern times, when - against all odds and all human expectation - the tiny nation of Israel has persisted in existing, and has successfully repelled all invaders, who have suffered, some of them terribly, for their actions against them.

The question of immediate interpretation arises, however. Is Zechariah envisaging an attack from enemies round about, and forewarning the returned exiles and assuring them that God will be with them? Certainly Jerusalem was beleaguered in the time of the Maccabees. Some have suggested there may be a reference to the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, but then Jerusalem was razed to the ground, whereas here in the prophecy it is preserved. We could certainly spiritualise these words and apply them to God's care for, and vindication of, His Church - 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' and that would also be true. That is not to say, however, that they are not capable of a more literal fulfilment in relation to the Jews themselves. The underlying principle applies to each situation alike.

43) 12:8-14

The prophet next enumerates the results of this divine deliverance. First of all (8), God's own people will be miraculously strengthened: the weakest among them will become as David, and the strong lifted, as it were, to divine rank. The metaphor need not be pressed, its import is surely clear and plain. And what encouragement and heartening to hard-pressed saints in Zechariah's day, as they faced the hazards of the ongoing work, with all its pressures and discouragements: Nor is it difficult to see what such an assurance would mean to God's people in the time of the Maccabees' troubles, or indeed to the saints in any age! One has only to think of how we ourselves sometimes react when reading the story of David, in 1 and 2 Samuel, and of the longing that arises in our hearts that we might know more of his experience of God. Well, here is a firm promise that we will! To be as David - in his magnificent, towering faith, as expressed in the Psalms, as the man after God's own heart, to know God as a shield and high tower, to dwell in the secret place of the most high, under the shadow of the Almighty - if all this is promised to us, why should we ever fear?

44) 12:8-14

The second result of the divine deliverance is unfolded in 10ff. The destruction of their enemies is to bring, not rejoicing, but a spirit of penitence and mourning for sin. This is a remarkable illustration of the Apostle's great word in Romans 2:4, 'the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance'. The reference to the pierced one in 10 takes us back to the shepherd of the previous chapters who had been rejected by the people, but it is just as certain that the forward reference, to Christ Himself, must be definitive in any interpretation of these words. But this is where the questions arise. We see clearly the application of the 'piercing' to the first coming of Christ. But to what does the mourning refer? It is true that down the ages of their history, they pierced Him by their sins, and often, doubtless, were brought to penitence by His grace. But the supreme act of their rebellion against Him - their piercing Him on the Cross - was not repented of then, and has not been repented of even yet, by the Jews as a people. True, the spirit of grace and supplication was poured upon men at Pentecost, when the New Testament Church was born, and multitudes of Jews were pricked to the heart and brought to repentance and faith in Him. But it will not do to spiritualise this word and exhaust its meaning in the context of the Christian Church. The ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy still lies in the future. This is the Church's warrant for Jewish Missions, and gives the assurance that at the last, as Paul maintains in Romans 11, Israel shall be saved.

45) 13:1-6

The third result of the divine deliverance and vindication mentioned in 12:1ff is the opening of a fountain of cleansing for the people of God (1). There are several points to note here. First of all, we should see the necessary and inevitable connection between the spirit of penitence in 12:9-14 and the idea of cleansing. The one follows the other, in spiritual experience. One thinks of Joseph Hart's words in the hymn

Convince us of our sin;
Then lead to Jesus' blood

- first the conviction of sin, then the cleansing. The repentant spirit is the great eye-opener. May we never forget this: If we want to learn and get knowledge in spiritual life, this is always the way, by maintaining the truly repentant spirit. Blessed are the poor in spirit, said Jesus, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Then, in the second place, the forward look of this wonderful verse (1) is surely to the cross of Jesus: when the soldier pierced His side, 'forthwith came there out blood and water' - this, in symbol, was the opening of the fountain. But to the house of David? Is there a literal reference here also? The Jews spurned that fountain, it is true, at the first coming of Christ - 'He came unto His own, and His own received Him not' (John 1:11) - and it may be that the prophetic vision is looking forward (as so often) to the end-time, when all Israel shall be saved.

46) 13:1-6

The fourth result of the divine deliverance is expressed in 2-6, in the removal of idolatry from the land, and the driving out of the prophets and the unclean spirit. This follows upon the 'cleansing' of 1. Moral transformation flows from the justifying mercy. Obviously, Zechariah is speaking of conditions in his own age. Later, Israel was not generally troubled with idol worship. He is describing the transformation in terms of things that were problems in his own time. Applied to later times, it is the principle that is important, and the meaning is simply that all that offends will be removed. Among the things that offended in Zechariah's vision were the false prophets. What seems to be envisaged here is not merely the abolition of false prophets, however, but prophecy itself. Delitzsch thinks the meaning is that a man is regarded as a false prophet and punished in consequence, simply because he prophesies, and that this rests upon the assumption that at that time there will be no more prophets, and that God will not raise them up or send them anymore. He continues: 'This assumption agrees both with the promise, that when God concludes a new covenant with His people and forgives their sins, no one will teach another anymore to know the Lord, but all, both great and small, will know Him, and all will be taught of God (Jeremiah 31:33, 34; Isaiah 54:13); and also with the teaching of the Scriptures that the Old Testament prophecy reached to John the Baptist, and attained its completion and its end in Christ (Matthew 11:13, Luke 16:16).' There is more to be said, however, on this, and we shall turn to it again in the next Note.

47) 13:1-6

There does seem to be some emphasis, at least, on the idea of false prophets. G. Adam Smith recalls that one of the earliest prophets, Amos, refused to call himself a prophet, for much the same reasons as are expressed here, in 3: 'As in his day, the prophets had become mere mercenary oracle-mongers, abjured to the point of death by their ashamed relatives.' When we bear in mind that this work of reformation was to follow the cleansing, and an expression of it, it becomes clear that a message of very real importance comes home to us also for our day. Here is another 'quote' from G. Adam Smith that is very pertinent in this connection: 'There are men who pass into the ministry by social pressure or the opinion of the circles they belong to, and there are men who adopt the profession simply because it is on the line of least resistance. From which false beginnings rise the spent force, the premature stoppages, the stagnancy, the aimlessness and heartlessness, which are the scandals of the professional ministry and the weakness of the Christian Church in our day. Men who drift into the ministry, as it is certain so many do, become mere ecclesiastical flotsam and jetsam, incapable of giving carriage to any soul across the waters of this life, uncertain of their own arrival anywhere, and of all the waste of their generation, the most patent and disgraceful. God will have no driftwood for His sacrifices, no driftmen for His ministers...'

Does not this have something to say, in relation to these verses, about the present crisis in the manpower situation in the Church?

48) 13:7-9

These words are important for us in that they are quoted by our Lord Himself in Matthew 26:31, and this of course determines their Messianic reference. But we should bear in mind the theme of 11:4ff, and the acted parable contained in these verses. The prophet 'acted' the parable, but we saw that it was a parable of all Israel's history, and particularly the summing-up of that history in their reaction against Christ. And here, in these verses before us, is the expression of that reaction. Here is the event which brings both judgment and grace upon them (cf 12: 10) - that which explains both the visitations upon them and also the spirit of penitence that is said to come upon them. Everything points to, and focuses on, the Cross. In 8, the widespread judgment that follows the smiting of the Shepherd is described - certainly the sack of Jerusalem in AD 70 must be included in this, but also the following ages of persecution and trial. The idea of a remnant, however, is prominent, indeed central - not, indeed, in the sense that it will escape the chastisement, but rather that out of the fiery trial there will yet come a people purified and submissive to the divine will. To them the covenant will be renewed, and once again the covenant God will speak to them in mercy and in grace, saying, 'This is my people.' In the end, mercy triumphs over wrath. To God be the glory!

49) 14:1-5

Delitzsch takes this whole chapter as a further expansion of the summary announcement of the judgment on Israel and its refinement, given in 13:7-9. He adds, 'Verses 1, 2 show how the flock is dispersed, and for the most part perishes; verses 2b-5, how the Lord brings back His hand over the small ones; verses 6-21, how the rescued remnant of the nation is endowed with salvation, and the kingdom of God completed by the reception of believers out of the heathen nations.' To put it like this is by no means to dispute that it describes the final, climactic battle between good and evil. It is, in fact, just that, although it would also be true to say that it represents all aspects of the conflict, in every age, and (to quote one commentator) pictures 'the condition of the Church from the time of the fall of Jerusalem until the present day. It has been a long and cloudy day, with some periods brighter than others, but without any period of absolute darkness or perfect light (6, 7). When this day approaches its close, instead of darkness becoming deeper, the light will grow brighter, and the glory of the Lord will illumine the land.' Certainly, however, the words are truest of the final day of the Lord (1).

50) 14:1-5

What are we to say about the concentration on Jerusalem here, in view of other Scriptural teaching about the universality of the Lord's coming - i.e. the fact that 'every eye shall see Him'? How could every eye see Him, if His coming is localised geographically at Jerusalem? Is Zechariah simply limited by his Jewish preconceptions? Hardly. Zechariah is not being Jewishly naive and parochial, and it is to misinterpret his message to suppose anything of the sort. Rather we must say this: we are here dealing with apocalyptic writing, and Jerusalem is a symbol (but remember, when we say something is symbolic it is not to say that it is nothing). The final climax of history has to be centred on Jerusalem for this reason: not any crassly geographical consideration, but a spiritual one, namely, that Jerusalem represents God and the things of God. The revolt of mankind is against God, and therefore the heading up of the whole conflict between good and evil must necessarily represent man's final revolt against God; and therefore it will involve those who in a special way represent God in the world, i.e. the Jews. What Zechariah sees is an attack on Jerusalem, not because Jerusalem is dead to him as a Jew, but because Jerusalem represents God in the world. Incidentally, this is why this vision is in some respects applicable also to the Church, for the Church also represents God in the world. It is certainly no accident that at our own late point in time we see both the focus of world attention upon Israel, on the one hand, and the determined oppression of the Church by anti-God power on the other. The two necessarily go together. Every significant description of the final conflict between good and evil must inevitably involve both the Jews and the Church.

51) 14:6-11

Something has already been said about 6, 7 (see Note for Saturday, 4th Feb.), but we should bear in mind that the fact that this whole passage is couched in apocalyptic terms is an indication that we do despite to the real meaning if we take it in a literal sense. What is being referred to (cf also 4, 5, in the reference to the cleaving of the Mt of Olives) is the interruption - and disruption - of the natural order. This is the essence of divine judgment in the world. Creation itself is affected by the sin of man (cf Genesis 3:17); and when the sin of man reached its zenith in the crucifying of the Son of God, the very rocks were rent and the earth convulsed (Matthew 27:51); and Christ Himself, in His Olivet prophecy, speaks of convulsions in nature at the time of His Coming (Matthew 24:29). There is an intrinsic connection between these references and the statements made by Zechariah. What is being spoken of, in each case, must be regarded as being the birth-pangs of the new creation, the new heavens and new earth, in which a totally different kind of situation will obtain, and in which the glorious ascendancy of God (represented in 8 and 10 by the lifting up of Jerusalem) will be the supreme reality. In that day, He will be all in all. That is the point that is being made.

52) 14:12-15

These are grim and terrible words, but inevitable; because when evil is brought right out into the open and seen to be what it really is, there is nothing left for it but total destruction. This is a necessary corollary of the victory of God: all that offends must be put away. It is not possible to have a new creation in which there is no more death and no more curse, if that which produces the curse is left undestroyed. We cannot have it both ways: there must be this final reckoning with evil. The Rev. W. Still has this to say about these verses: 'This is not a passage for the squeamish. But then, neither is any passage which describes the horrors the heathen have perpetrated on God's chosen people in their days of trouble. A God Who has the courage to permit and ordain such evil must surely be allowed to punish it when it has completed its work for Him. And if men who refuse to be separated from their sins are not to be destroyed, what is to be done with their sins? There is no logic in this squeamishness. In fact, on examination it is seen not to arise from pity at all, unless it be a pity that pities wicked man more than holy God. Are you out of sympathy with God? If not, you must let Him have His grim way with His own creation, including His avowed enemies.'

53) 14:16-21

Grim as the judgment in the previous verses is, room is nevertheless left for the possibility of repentance and salvation, and the final verses of the prophecy speaks of the ingathering of the heathen into the kingdom of God. The reference to the feast of tabernacles being kept can hardly be taken literally (the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that the old ordinances were typical, and superceded by Christ the great Anti-type), and this is not the point that is being made. The real significance of the symbol is that, in the kingdom of God, worship will take over and will be the heart and essence of all. The New Testament parallel is found in Revelation 7:9, where the imagery is also taken from the feast of tabernacles. The reason this feast is mentioned, rather than another, is that 'the feast of tabernacles in its historical allusion was a feast of thanksgiving for the gracious protection of Israel in its wanderings through the desert, and its introduction into the promised land with its abundance of glorious blessings, whereby it foreshadowed the blessedness to be enjoyed in the kingdom of God' (Delitzsch).

Similarly the reference to the Canaanite (21) is symbolic of the final removal of all that offended. In the kingdom of God there will be no alien or malevolent influences, all will be excluded, and forever. As the book of Revelation puts it, in heaven there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.... no more of any of the things that offend, that ought not to be.

54) Final Look

Romans 11:12-15

As a tail-piece to our studies in Zechariah we look at these remarkable words of Paul's about the place of Israel in the economy of God. They serve to explain the assurance he expresses that all Israel in the end shall be saved. There is a mysterious interaction between the words 'rejection' and 'reconciliation', which provides the key to his thought. Paul is using words and ideas in relation to the Jews which he uses elsewhere (2 Corinthians 5:19) of God's reconciliation of the world in the death of Christ, thus linking the rejection of the Jews with the rejection of Christ in procuring the world's salvation. Christ said 'salvation is of the Jews' (John 4:22), and Paul here gives particular meaning to His words. So far as the Jews are concerned, even in their rejection and refusal of God's Son as their Messiah, they are still His chosen people: He is determined, whether they will or no, to make them His instrument of light and salvation to the world. And He makes them His vessels of mercy to the world, through their becoming vessels of wrath (cf Romans 9:22, 23 RSV), just as Christ became a 'vessel of wrath' for our sakes, becoming a curse for us, that salvation might come to the world. It is this link between Christ's sufferings and Israel's rejection that is the basis of Paul's assurance that Israel will finally be saved. Their rejection is not final, precisely because it plays an integral part in the purposes of God: when these purposes are completed (i.e. the salvation of the Gentiles), it will no longer be necessary, for it will have fulfilled its 'role' in the divine intention, and will therefore be revoked. So all Israel will be saved.