

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Lesson 3: Return to Me: The Visions Begin -- Zechariah 1:1-2:13

There is a particular kind of homesickness that does not come from being far away. It comes from being far off in the heart. You can be sitting in your own kitchen, surrounded by familiar faces, and still feel a quiet distance between you and God, a sense that things are not what they once were. You remember a season when prayer was warmer, when worship felt alive, when obedience came gladly. Now there is a coolness you cannot fully explain. You have not renounced anything. You have simply drifted, a degree at a time, until one day you look up and God seems a long way off. Into exactly that ache comes the very first word of Zechariah, and it is not a rebuke so much as an open door: return to Me.

Zechariah prophesied to a people who knew about distance. Their grandparents had been carried into exile in Babylon because earlier generations would not listen to the prophets. Now the remnant had come home, but the homecoming was hard. The temple still lay unfinished, the city walls were broken, the work had stalled, and discouragement had settled over them like a fog. Before God shows this weary prophet a single vision, He gives him one urgent message to deliver: do not be like your fathers, who would not turn back. The earlier prophets are gone, and even the fathers are gone, but the word of God overtook them all, and it still stands. Learn from their stubbornness. Do not repeat it.

Then, in a single night, God opens the curtain on a series of strange and wonderful visions. A rider on a red horse stands among the myrtle trees in a glen, with horses behind him, and the angel of the Lord cries out, how long will You withhold mercy? And God answers with words a discouraged people desperately needed to hear: I am exceedingly jealous for Zion, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy, My house shall be built in it. Then four horns appear, the powers that scattered God's people, and four craftsmen come to throw them down. Then a young man goes out with a measuring line to size up Jerusalem, and God interrupts to say the city will be too full to fit inside walls, for He Himself will be a wall of fire around her and the glory in her midst.

These are not just ancient pictures for a long-dead people. They are God's heart laid bare, and that heart has not changed. He is still the God who calls the drifting to return, who is fiercely protective of His people, who promises, I will dwell in your midst. Under the new covenant His house is His people, the church, where He lives by His Spirit, and His promise to be a wall of fire and a glory within is fulfilled in Christ and poured out on all who come to Him from every nation. So read these chapters slowly. Let the call to return find the cool and distant places in your own heart, and let the promises remind you what kind of God is waiting for you when you turn back.

Group Discussion: God's opening word is, "Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you" (1:3), set against the fathers who "did not hear or pay attention to me" (1:4). What are some of the subtle, undramatic ways people drift away from wholehearted devotion to God without ever deciding to leave Him? Why is it so easy to repeat the very patterns we saw fail in the generation before us?

Personal Reflection: Zechariah warns the people not to be like their fathers, who would not turn back even when the prophets called (1:4-6). Is there an area where God has been calling you to return, and you have quietly put it off, telling yourself you will deal with it later? Name it honestly, and consider what turning back would actually require of you this week.

Read Zechariah 1:1-2:13

Study Questions

1. The book opens with the great call, "Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you" (1:3). What does this command reveal about the nature of repentance and about the God who issues it? Why does God put the first move on the people ("return to me") and yet promise His own response ("and I will return to you")?
2. God urges the people, "Do not be like your fathers," who would not listen to the prophets (1:4). When you look honestly at the spiritual patterns of the people who shaped you, which ones do you want to carry on, and which ones do you need to deliberately break so they do not repeat in you? Name one specific pattern you do not want to inherit.
3. God reminds the people that, although the prophets and even the fathers eventually died, His words "did overtake your fathers" (1:5-6), and they finally admitted the Lord had dealt with them justly. What does this teach about the enduring authority and reliability of God's word, even across generations and long delays?
4. When Zechariah's fathers finally said, "As the Lord of hosts purposed to deal with us ... so has he dealt with us" (1:6), they were acknowledging that God had been right all along.

Where in your own life have you finally come to admit that God's way was right and yours was not? What did it take to bring you to that honest confession?

5. In the first vision, the angel of the Lord asks, "O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem?" and God answers with "gracious and comforting words" that He is "exceedingly jealous for Zion" (1:12-14). What does God's jealousy for His people teach us about the kind of love He has for them? How is this jealousy a comfort rather than a threat?
6. Into a discouraged, stalled community God declares, "I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it" (1:16). Where do you most need to hear that God has not given up on you or on a work He started in you, even though it has stalled or felt hopeless? Where have you been tempted to conclude that God has stopped caring?
7. In the second vision, the four horns that "scattered Judah" are confronted by four craftsmen who come "to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations" (1:18-21). What does this teach about God's response to the powers and forces that scatter and afflict His people? Why is it significant that God raises up those who will throw down what threatens His people?
8. God tells the man with the measuring line that Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the multitude of people and livestock in it (2:4). Where in your life have you tried to put limiting "walls" around what God wants to do, settling for a small and manageable faith when He intends something far larger? What would it look like to stop measuring and start trusting His expansion?

9. At the heart of these chapters God makes staggering promises: “I will be to her a wall of fire all around, and I will be the glory in her midst” (2:5), and “I will dwell in your midst” (2:10–11), with “many nations” joining themselves to the Lord. How are these promises of God’s protective presence, His indwelling glory, and the gathering of the nations fulfilled, not in a future earthly political restoration of national Israel or a rebuilt temple, but in Christ and in His church, where God dwells by His Spirit and into which the gospel gathers people from every nation? Trace how the New Testament shows this to be the true and greater fulfillment.
10. Look back across the whole passage, from the call to “return to me,” through the visions of the horseman, the horns and craftsmen, and the measuring line, to the climactic promise, “I will dwell in your midst.” Name one specific way the Lord is calling you to return to Him this week, and how the assurance that He longs to dwell with you and protect you gives you courage to take that first step.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Luke 15:11–24, the father who runs to meet the son who returns; James 4:8–10, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you”; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, the people of God as His temple where His Spirit dwells; Ephesians 2:11–22, the nations brought near and built together into a dwelling place for God; Revelation 21:3, the final promise that God will dwell with His people.

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