

Studies in Zechariah

David Gooding

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w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com
e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

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The God of Restoration

Let us begin our devotional study by reading in the prophecy of Zechariah.

Upon the four and twentieth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, I saw in the night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom; and behind him there were horses, red, sorrel and white. Then said I, O my lord, what are these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will show you what these be. And the man that stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, These are they whom the LORD hath sent to walk to and fro throughout the earth. And they answered the angel of the LORD that stood among the myrtle trees and said, We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still and is at rest. Then the angel of the LORD answered and said, O LORD of hosts, how long will thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these three score and ten years? And the LORD answered the angel that talked with me with good words, even comfortable words. So the angel that talked with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy. And I am very sore displeased with the nations that are at ease, for I was but a little displeased and they helped forward the affliction. Therefore thus saith the LORD: I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies; my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth over Jerusalem. Cry yet again, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem. (1:7-17)

May God who dictated these words speak them again to our hearts this afternoon.

Introduction

As we wait together upon the Lord in our times of devotion this week, it has seemed good to me that we should listen to the words of God through his ancient prophet Zechariah. I do not propose in these limited hours to talk about what is in fact the main burden of this great prophecy. For Zechariah's prophecy, as you know, is concerned with the restoration of Israel and, in particular, with the restorations of the city of Jerusalem, both those in the past and that which is to come. Even if I were able to do so, which I'm not, this would be an inappropriate time for me to attempt to discuss all the learned prophetic matters that are here involved.

Rather, I propose that we should listen again to the words of God speaking to and through his ancient prophet that we might see again, and lay hold by faith in our hearts, of what kind of a God our God is. As we see him reacting to the behaviour of his ancient people and discover, through what he has to say to them, something of his heart, something of his character, something of the personality that is God, we shall find it speaks its own words of encouragement to us in our very different circumstances.

The first great lesson that we shall learn as we listen to the Lord talking to his people is that God, our God, is the God of restoration. He was then, and he is now. Granted that, in this prophecy, God will be concerned chiefly with the restoration of the city of Jerusalem, yet even that is a remarkable thing and speaks volumes to our hearts about the nature of God. Remember how uniquely privileged Jerusalem City had been, of all the cities upon the face of the earth, in all the length and breadth of history. Jerusalem City was favoured uniquely above all by the condescending dwelling of God in that city in his temple. And in spite of that incalculable grace, Jerusalem City had grown ungrateful and obstinate in her sin and perversity, until at length the infinite patience of God could do no other than bring upon her grievous discipline at the hands of the ancient Babylonians.

Why, we say, didn't God take the easy route and destroy Jerusalem City completely? What need has almighty God of a few bricks in Jerusalem City in a tiny little postage stamp-size country? Why could he not start again and afresh? But no, not God. What a marvellous God we have. God is a God of restoration and he will have patience with his people still and restore even that city. That God is a God of restoration is writ large to us on the first page of our New Testament. As our Old Testament closes the door upon the earlier revelation, and opens up the new vistas that come with the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord, it pauses to survey the story hitherto. And Matthew, with the wisdom given to him, divides the history from Abraham to our Lord's coming into three parts, ingeniously arranging the genealogies that we might see the point. Three equal parts, as Matthew counts them, of the ways of God with his people that eventually led to the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Restoration in Israel's history

There was that early part from Abraham to David. I think sometimes, in my boyish enthusiasm, I should like to have lived then. They were days of pioneer discovery in the ways of God and the things of God. Good old Abraham, how he was blessed of God to discover justification by faith, for instance. Can you remember the day when you discovered it, in all its newness and its wonder? Justification by faith—it lifted you to heaven and to salvation. And then all the great promises and the glorious future, the seed that should inherit the gates of his enemies, the glorious and eternal city that God called Abraham to look forward to. What days they were.

Of course like all mortals they had their down days, but on the whole it was up. There was Joseph in Egypt, with the keys of all the granaries of Egypt clanking from his belt, and he the son of Jacob. Oh, what days they were. You never knew what God was going to do next. When you thought he'd disappointed you, as old Jacob did, thinking he'd lost a quarter of his family, then God surprised him with glories beyond his imagination—Joseph in Egypt. True,

there came the brick kilns and the difficult years. They did but paint the background to greater things. With the intervention of almighty God, the great I am, God displayed himself to his people and brought them out of the tyranny of Egypt and through the Red Sea and through the wilderness. And, with indescribable patience, he brought them in spite of their failings, often dragging them by the heels, into Canaan and through the conquest. They were breath-taking moments to see the walls of Jericho go flat and the great giant Canaanites conquered.

If in the times of the judges there came moments of despair and disillusionment, they weren't allowed to last and the great movement led on to those glorious days of King David and King Solomon. Then indeed Israel thought they had got to paradise. This to them was the golden age to which all had been pointing. Silver was so common it was like the stones in the street. 'If you dropped a bit from your pocket, you didn't bother to pick it up,' says the chronicler in his history. Gold was plentiful, and enemies dismissed, and all was marvellous. What days they were, but David didn't turn out to be the Messiah. A good job, you may think, sitting in your seat this afternoon. How would you have liked a messiah with a few spears and an odd sword, living in a very insanitary palace in Jerusalem? No, he was only a prototype of things to come.

Then, to everybody's dismay, things soon began to go wrong. The nation became middle-aged and, instead of going forward, they went backward; instead of uphill, downhill. They tottered from one disaster to another and from one apostasy to the next. It is a danger that besets the middle-aged. Let me not point the lesson further. Yes, there came times of great revival and encouragement. Names like Elijah and Elisha come from this period, with blessed and godly men like Jehoshaphat leading revivals amongst God's people. But there is no denying the overriding trend was down until it ended in nothing short of disaster. Israel was carried away to Assyria and Judah to Babylon, there to hang their harps upon the willow trees, mourning for what might have been and all that was now lost.

If God's people must be such a desperate crew, so ungrateful, so short-sighted, so disobedient, so apostate, why, we ask ourselves, with all that evidence in front of him and in spite of his patient work these many centuries, didn't God finally abandon them to their fate and start again with something new? But if you think like that, you haven't read the heart of God. 'Oh, Ephraim,' says he, 'how can I give you up?' Writ large into the third great period of Israel's history is this: that God is the God of restoration, who patiently restores broken things and restores his people when they go astray. So Jerusalem was restored.

And God is not only a God who restores his favoured people. Let me turn you aside a moment to the story of Daniel 4. God is so much a God of restoration that he will bother to restore even an ungodly monarch like Nebuchadnezzar II, that great beautifier of Babylon, the developer of Babylonian culture with its glorious splendour and riot of aesthetics. But Nebuchadnezzar got puffed up in his pride and his culture, and he went astray and became corrupt. And God, instead of bringing his judgments upon him and upon the city, disciplined the king, intending to restore even a Nebuchadnezzar; and that he did.

As we think of these things, our hearts surely begin to burn within us. We may feel ourselves better than Nebuchadnezzar. We might even feel ourselves better than Israel and Jerusalem City. But which one of us will lay our hand upon our heart and say, 'I don't need

restoration'? Where would any of us be at this very moment in our spiritual pilgrimage were it not for this glorious thing about God? We share David's sentiment in his twenty-third psalm, 'He restoreth my soul'.

You say to me perhaps, 'That restoration of Israel after the exile wasn't much of a restoration, was it?' And if you argue so, I should have to agree with you. It started in a flurry of enthusiasm, but it soon got bogged down. The great and glorious promises that God seemed to issue through Haggai, of a glorious golden age and a temple the like of which had never been before, were hardly fulfilled in that particular restoration. 'No,' you say, 'and at the end of it, they murdered their own Messiah. What kind of a restoration was that?'

Well I grant your point. But it adds weight to my theme. Would God bother to restore them if they made such poor use of their period of restoration? Yes, he would. I'll tell you something more. At the end of that great period of restoration, when Messiah came and they murdered their Messiah, you have underestimated God if you should think that he will now at last finally abandon them. 'Has God cast away his people that he foreknew? Certainly not,' says Paul (see Rom 11:1). Even in these early days when God was speaking through Zechariah on that first restoration, he was holding promises of a far greater restoration. Looking down the ages God was already determined upon it, in spite of their crime that they pierced God's Son, that they counted the Messiah so contemptible that a few pieces of silver were enough to satisfy them as they betrayed him; in spite of it and in spite of long, weary years of discipline, God will yet restore his ancient people again and restore their city. He is a God of restoration.

Israel's unique witness to the nations

Nor should we, in any sense of superiority, despise what Israel were able to perform in that long-distant day when they came back from Babylon. Sure, they didn't accomplish what we've accomplished, but there were many good and faithful souls that worked their fingers to the bone as they scabbled amongst the rubble of broken Jerusalem and its destroyed temple. In faith of God and his promises, they built again and toiled at their particular part of the restoration. Granted, the glorious promises were not all fulfilled for them. Some of them wait to be fulfilled, but God was not mocking them when he held before their eyes visions of a world so wonderful, so cleansed, so beautiful; of a nation restored and so filled with God's Spirit that the very saucepans in Jerusalem would be engraved 'holiness to the Lord'. God was not mocking them, I say, when he held out those far visions of those coming glories. As they thought of them by day, and dreamt of them by night, it gave them courage to start again; to build again broken things, and know the restoration of God in their own national life and in their own personal life, as far as they might be known in that distant age.

Restoration for us

As we listen, shall we not take courage too? Ours is not to rebuild a literal Jerusalem or a literal temple in that city, but anybody's restoration is an encouragement to me. We serve the same God, we fight the same war. Granted we fight different battles on different battlefields, and often by vastly different weapons from what Israel used, but it is ultimately part of the

same great battle. As we read of God's way of restoration with them, it is surely legitimate that we take encouragement in our hearts.

God is a God of restoration. He will not leave off until the whole war is won; he, who restored Jerusalem City in power in bygone centuries. He, who will restore Jerusalem City yet again and make it the wonder of the world. He, who one day, according to Peter in his sermon of Acts 3, will restore all those things that any prophet has ever talked about from the foundation of the world. He, who one day will restore our sad and suffering planet, until creation herself is delivered from bondage to corruption. That is the God who this afternoon thinks on you and me. He is the God who restores my soul.

In choosing to speak on these topics with you, be assured that I haven't decided that you are apostates or anywhere near it, or that you are guilty of such wandering of heart as were ancient Israel. You sit before me, a bunch of the most godly missionaries that ever was seen on the face of the earth! And what a delight it is for me, an old-age pensioner, to see so many young missionaries with us now, going out on their first occasion to the field. Goodness me, you haven't had time to go astray, let alone get to be discouraged. You didn't come to hear about a God of restoration; you came to hear about a pioneering God. May God so bless you that you never need to be restored, my brother and sister. But just a little footnote in your mind, tucked away somewhere, that should you ever need to be restored, your God is able and willing to do that too.

It might surprise you how soon those moments come. For all the golden promises that we shall read in prophets like Zechariah and Haggai and Malachi, there's no disguising the fact that this restoration was difficult business. The prophet in his introduction reminds us that the restoration had started some years earlier, and with great enthusiasm on the part of people like Ezra and Nehemiah, and those keen souls who dared to leave the comfort of their well paid jobs in the insurance offices of Babylon and come to rebuild Jerusalem. But that early enthusiasm had waned, the work was so very difficult. It's easier sometimes to build a house from scratch than to repair one that's gone wrong. Easier when you don't have to cope with the past and its mistakes, and you have a clean sheet and can build afresh without all the memories of the past. It's more difficult when you want to build something fresh but first of all have got to take away the rubble of past failures.

And it's frustrating work—knowing how to discern between what's broken beyond repair, and what's good material but fallen just a little bit and which mustn't be despised but must be valued and reused. There were many sore fingers in those days from sorting out amongst the rubble and retrieving things. But the God that sent them for that task is a God of restoration. He loves you now, my brother and sister, and should you ever get broken like Peter was broken, all of a sudden and to his great consternation, God will not write you off. God values you. He will want to restore you and use you again, if it is at all possible. Some of our modern public companies are more concerned with their schemes than the people they use to put them into practice. But God is concerned with you.

It wasn't only the frustrating work of beginning again and restoring the broken that was difficult. It was the opposition that came upon them, so heavy, so altogether out of proportion, and soon the initial enthusiasm had departed and they were in the doldrums. And some of us might have a fellow-feeling in our heart. Some of our great grandfathers tried

to do a job of restoration in Christendom. After all the wanderings and vagaries of centuries, Christendom came with enthusiasm once more to the New Testament, and determined to get back to what was originally there and restore assembly principle to what it used to be. It would be very easy, my brothers and sisters, now in our generation to give up and say it's unworkable and the complications of Christendom so intricate and such a vast weight that trying to restore things to a New Testament situation is more than can be hoped for. We too, perhaps, then need to pause and take encouragement from what it was that God said will accompany the work of restoration in spite of all the difficulties.

Restoration—God's initiative

We come to the very first vision in the book—and a most delightful thing, whose principle we may extend beyond Jerusalem and the restoration of Israel to all those restorations that ever take place in the heart of any of God's people. Whence comes the urge in our heart, after our sorrows and our mistakes and our frustrations and our despairs; whence comes that surge of new interest and new enthusiasm and the courage to start again? Be assured that the initiative doesn't start with us, as the prophet learns in the first vision that is given to him. We read that at dead of night he was standing there in the myrtle trees and watching the mysterious activities of the great administrative powers of heaven, who reported to the angel of the Lord as they came from walking up and down through the earth and doing their statistical assessments of the situation. But all the earth was at rest.

As far as Israel was concerned, it seemed disastrous. Here was a spiritual doldrums, feared by every spiritual navigator amongst the people of God. A situation when things are far from good; there's no progress, there's no advance, there's no pioneer and the very best people are fighting the rear-guard action and nothing much is happening. Outside everywhere is calm and nobody is concerned. Where now shall come the initiative for revival and restoration? We hear the answer as that terrible silence is broken by the intercessions; not of Israel to be sure, many of whom were snoring in their beds. The silence is broken by the intercessions of the one the prophet here describes as the angel of the Lord—none other than the one we would call the second person of the Trinity.

Now indeed we are introduced to something most wonderful and most sacred. Not only to hear the intercessions of him whom we in subsequent ages have learnt to love so well, but to hear the actual contents of his intercession as he interceded with God on the behalf of his people. Our hearts take a leap and our spiritual pulses begin to race. How many a night, my brother and sister, when you've gone to bed exhausted, worried, tired and depressed, for you were sunk in sleep, sleeping maybe for very sorrow, there was heard in the heavenly courts above the voice of your great intercessor calling upon the divine Father, discussing with him his discipline of your case and pleading for you. A time of new initiative, new beginnings, new surges of power and new accomplishments.

We owe more than we can imagine, not to our zeal but to his; to the one who daily intercedes for us and ever shall. And if, thinking in human terms, we observe how successful his intercessions were then, what shall we feel in our age? We who live in days when the blessed second person of the Trinity has long since become human and known from practical

experience what temptation and opposition means; who has learnt obedience by the things which he suffered. He has run the race and knows the energy required for running it to the end. He has endured the cross and now has sat down. God has given him to us, appointed by divine oath as our priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. Surely you will be restored if it depends upon his intercession. Hear him now as he discusses with God the matter of God's discipline and hear an infinitely touching thing. He cries to God the Father, 'How long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah against which thou hast had indignation these three score and ten years?' (Zech 1:12).

Restoration—in God's way

Our Lord is interceding for his people and for the cessation of discipline. You must not think that there is any conflict within the Godhead. You must not fall into the pagan superstition that God the Father is stern and severe, and God the Son is kindly; for the second person of the Trinity tells out what is in the Father's heart. But here lies the problem for God, who loves his people and will spare them pain, but loves them too much to permit their unchecked sinning. Here is the problem for God who has set his hand to our salvation—not merely our salvation in the sense of forgiveness of sins, but our salvation from our failings here in life; our salvation in the sense of our ultimate glorification, our conformity to the image of God's Son. Because we are never-dying spirits, God's love determines that he will not give us up until he has fulfilled his purpose and we are finally like Christ. Therefore God's love cannot always afford to be kind, with that kind of superficial kindness with which an indulgent parent will excuse the child its school lessons because the child finds them difficult; and yielding to indulge the child now risks his whole future. No so God. Be the pains of spiritual education ever so severe, God will educate us, his people, correcting us when we go astray; disciplining us by positive training, severe as it may seem, so that our faith may grow and our likeness to Christ increase.

You will think I'm a terrible man and in need of restoration, and you would be correct. Watching the way of God with his people, I have long since decided myself that God is very tough. You will forgive me, and I'm sure God does, when I say that I wouldn't treat my dog, nor allow it to suffer, as God sometimes allows his people to suffer. But then, you see, my dog has a very limited future, and if he should get some illness it would be a kindness to put him down. But you are eternal spirits, begotten of God, children of God with an eternity of glory before you, so God will not give you up until he has brought you through. Be the suffering ever so great, yet here as the angel of the Lord he pleads before God and asks now for a cessation of the discipline and for happier days ahead. God comes out of the shadow, so to speak, and orders that his reply to the intercessor be published abroad that all may know it.

First of all God is concerned, so we read, that his people should understand the proportions of the discipline that they have been through. You say, 'They deserved their discipline, didn't they? When they sinned against God, were not they rightly carted off to Babylon?' I know, my brother and sister, but consider all the brutality of the Assyrians, the shocking heartlessness of the Babylonians. We think of the tiny children in the refugee columns; we think of the rape; we think of the dehumanising tortures of the Assyrians. We

think of the proportions of the discipline. And as we think of God's disciplines in later years, isn't it the proportions of them that make us wonder?

I was travelling just recently through roads that were signposted to Auschwitz. One day when God restores his ancient people, will he not have some explaining to do? Yes, they deserved his discipline, but six million Jews systematically gassed? How will you explain the proportions of their suffering? Isn't it that which has sometimes troubled your heart, when you have found believers suffering in the modern world, like Job in the ancient? We should be made aware of his intercessions for us and the comfort of a God ready to restore us in every case of need. So let us return and give him our grateful praise.

Oh Lord, our God, we thank thee now for thy holy word. We thank thee for the solace of it. We thank thee that though these Scriptures are ancient, yet in them we hear the very voice of God and feel the heart of God beating. We bless thee now for him who intercedes for us, maintaining our faith and restoring our souls. And Father, we bow humbly and submissively before thee and we thank thee for thy fatherly disciplines. Help us, we beseech thee, not to let our hands hang down or our knees to buckle. Rather, submitting to all thy training and thy disciplines, may we prove thy promise that afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby. And thus we wait upon thee, seeking thy blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Restoration of Relationship

We read now in Zechariah 1, as we take up the story from verse 18.

And I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and behold four horns. And I said unto the angel that talked with me, What be these? And he answered me, These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem. And the LORD showed me four smiths. Then said I, What come these to do? And he spake, saying, These are the horns which scattered Judah so that no man did lift up his head: but these are come to fray them, to cast down the horns of the nations, which lifted up their horn against the land of Judah to scatter it.

And I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof. And, behold, the angel that talked with me went forth, and another angel went out to meet him, and said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, by reason of the multitude of men and cattle therein. For I, saith the LORD, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and I will be the glory in the midst of her. Ho, ho, flee from the land of the north, saith the LORD: for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heaven, saith the LORD. Ho Zion, escape, thou that dwellest with the daughter of Babylon. For thus saith the LORD of hosts: After glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye. For, behold, I will shake mine hand over them, and they shall be a spoil to those that served them: and ye shall know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee. And the LORD shall inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and shall yet choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all flesh, before the LORD: for he is waked up out of his holy habitation. (1:18–2:13)

Yesterday we began to listen together to the words of the Lord through his servant, the prophet Zechariah. Immediately we drew the very obvious but delightful lesson that God is a God who loves to restore his people and gives himself to this gracious task with unwearied patience. Simultaneously, however, we learnt that the work of restoring Jerusalem City and its temple in ancient times was not the matter of a moment, but a long, drawn-out, often weary and sometimes painful, procedure. Surely God was behind the return of Ezra and Nehemiah and that faithful remnant that came out of Babylon, back to the promised land. But

though God was with them and many a miracle of his grace was present with them, there was no magic.

Restoration involves perseverance

It wasn't that, as they came to Jerusalem and saw its desolations Ezra got out some magic wand and waved it and, lo and behold, without any labour, there began to spring out of the ground a newly built temple and a delightful Jerusalem, all in a split second of time. It didn't happen like that. We who know the realities of life could scarce believe a Bible if it said that that was what happened. There is miracle with God. There is no magic. The work of restoring Jerusalem, its city and its temple from the ruins that Israel's sin had brought upon them, was a work to which God called his people in perseverance. They were to work with him, and he with them, patiently and persistently, through the difficulties of repairing the damage. That of course is a thing that will not surprise us who live in this day and age.

God forgives the sins of the repentant sinner. He doesn't always immediately remove the consequences of his sin. If you give yourself to drinking methylated spirits every morning before breakfast throughout your unregenerate days, and get involved in drunken brawls and lose one of your legs in consequence, when you turn in repentance to the Lord he will forgive your sin and fill your heart with his joy; he won't necessarily restore the leg you've lost forthwith. He'll do it one day, at the resurrection. He may well leave you, he normally does, short of one leg, to hobble your way through the rest of life and learn the patience of living with the past and its consequences.

When we observe the life of believers who since their conversion have gone on with the Lord consistently, without grievous lapses, we see that the work of their sanctification is no lightning procedure, but a long drawn-out path of progress. As Paul reminds us in his classic words, 'Not that I have already attained, but I follow after, pressing toward the goal' (see Phil 3:12-14). And Peter tells us likewise that if we would qualify not merely for entrance into the eternal kingdom, but for an abundant entrance into that kingdom, then it calls for patient continuance and perseverance with the Lord, as we add all diligence and seeking to add in the power of our faith, moral goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance and brotherly love (see 1 Pet 1).

If that is so with the normal procedure of our sanctification, how much more if per chance God's people have fallen into some spiritual disaster or waywardness. When they come back to the Lord and know his gracious forgiveness and the sense of his presence again, the task of rebuilding can be long and painful. It was so in the life of David, king of Judah. He sinned and from the evidence it appears that he attempted for a long while to cover up his sin, and God's hand lay heavy upon him in psychosomatic discipline. When he repented, God forgave him and hugged him close to his heart once more. He needed the warmth of that affection, for before him lay difficult years facing the consequences of that sorry lapse from God and the brokenness in his family.

I was talking recently to a missionary who had gone to a certain country. He went to a small assembly to help them while he learnt the language. Scarcely had he arrived, he told me, when the whole assembly was almost blown to smithereens by the public scandalous

behaviour of one of its elders. Now that elder faces the long and difficult task of living down that terrible act, of living down the past, of seeking out and gathering together believers whose faith has been stumbled, and of rebuilding the testimony of the church. That kind of thing is not done in five minutes.

Learning from the past

We notice therefore in the very early verses of the prophecy that God reminds his people, though they have returned from Babylon, of the sins of their fathers in past days. There is a sense in which we are called upon to forget those things which are behind. Unnecessary regret can be depressing and debilitating. Yet God does not always remove the past and causes us to remember it. I remember my good father in the days of my infancy, when I broke his commands and played ball near the drawing room window and cracked the whole thing from top to bottom. I was duly forgiven, but my father in his wisdom left the old cracked pane of glass for a long time. With what embarrassment to my infant mind when friends came round and said, 'Oh, what a pity. You cracked your glass. How did that happen?' Why did he leave it? In his wisdom it taught me not to play ball so near again to the lounge window. For, if in five minutes, the thing had been repaired, I would have been forgiven, yes, but the danger would have been I would not have learnt the seriousness of sin.

You will observe, as you have read the letters of Peter, that though he was forgiven and knew it, and revelled in the joy of the forgiveness with which Christ had restored him, yet ever and again there comes peering through his writing, the memory of his past. How would he ever forget it? He talks to us at one stage of that living stone, rejected indeed of men, and I think there must almost have fallen upon the page as he wrote it, a tear of remembrance of the time when our Lord had begun to teach him that lesson that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem and be rejected. And Peter had had the impertinence to contradict the Lord. He'd never forget it. As he wrote now for his fellow believers that same lesson that he had learnt so painfully, it wasn't the sorrow of the world but godly sorrow that helped Peter, and through him has helped us. Or again, as we read Peter saying, 'Since Christ has suffered, you arm yourselves to suffer,' what memories would have flooded through Peter's heart. Oh, if he had never have done it, but it was undoable; he was forgiven yet the memory would never perish this side of glory.

As now these people stand in Zechariah's day in the ruins of the past, God calls on them to remember that past—'Remember your fathers: where are they now?' Not to discourage his people but, at this moment, the path of restoration being so difficult, the danger was that they would give up and rest content. They were positionally correct: they had returned in the sense that they had returned geographically to the land. But with the opposition growing so great and the difficulties so large, they had for the time being lapsed once more into complacency, a dangerous state for anyone to lapse into. Like a well-run business, the Christian life either goes forward or it tends to go backward.

True restoration

What then is true restoration? It is not just being content with some kind of position. That we have gone back in our ecclesiastical life to the early principles of the New Testament and positionally we hold those convictions, that is good. But hear the prophet crying in the name of the Lord, 'You've returned to the land. Return to me,' says the Lord, 'and I will return to you'—the heart that is engaged with the living God in living experience. Hence we are comforted as we think again of the gracious intercessions of the Son of God that, in those difficult days, set the initiative for the new surge of life and activity.

But now as his gracious intercessions begin to revive his people and they set their hand again to the work to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, there comes the first vision in chapter 1, a short vision with the Lord's announcement of his putting an end to the opposition for the time being. 'There come four smiths to fray and to cast down the horns of the nations which lifted up their horn against the land of Judah to scatter it.' The learned commentators and expositors assure us, some of them, that these four horns that scattered Israel are prophecies of four great empires that in the coming days would dominate Israel. This morning, we leave the discussion of such things to them. We're interested to notice that here God comforts his people in the thought that God himself is in supreme control even of the opposition. Yes, we saw yesterday that the sufferings of the nation had been so extreme that God was delighted for the opportunity to explain that not all those sufferings had come directly from the hand of the Lord. God had disciplined his people, but the enemy had gone beyond the divine intention and taken advantage of it and tried to destroy Israel, whereas God was out to refine them. So often it is in our lives; experiences that God designs for our refining, Satan will try to exploit for our undoing.

God in control

We cannot understand all the mysteries of providence; why God allows this and why he allows his enemies so often to seem to triumph. Yet we comfort our hearts in the thought that here is no accident. God has not lost control. He remains in supreme control even of his enemies, and when he says, 'Stop,' they stop. Indeed, they have to get his permission to start. You will remember what our blessed Lord said to his apostles in the upper room. 'Satan has desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat' (Luke 22:31). 'Desired', being old English for 'asked'. 'Satan has asked to have you', from which it appears that Satan cannot just assault and attack the people of God at his whim and pleasure, but must ask permission of almighty God. God normally maintains a hedge about his people. You will remember the same thing is said in the book of Job as Satan comes accusingly into the presence of God saying, 'Does Job serve you for nothing? You have put a hedge around him. You have featherbedded him. Take the hedge away. Let me get at him and you'll see he'll curse you to your face' (see Job 1:9–11). God gave permission to Satan, without which Satan could have done nothing. It is a comfort, surely.

It is similarly an encouragement, as we stand before the living Lord addressing his churches about the persecution that is to come upon them and then again in the matter of their pioneer evangelism. He says, 'Satan is about to cast some of you into prison and you

shall have affliction ten days.' Even before it happened, the time was already set. What a lovely thing it is to hear even this morning in our hearts the jangling of the keys on the belt of our blessed Lord, 'I am he that holds the key of David. I shut and no one opens. I open and no one shuts. Behold, I have set before you an open door' (see Rev 3:7–8). It is not ours to question the strategies of almighty God. Now that there are vast countries under Muslim sway that seem so little to have been penetrated, and it would seem to us that wave after wave of missionary endeavour has fallen back, we mustn't lose our hold on the glorious fact that ultimately our blessed Lord holds the key of David. When he opens the door, none can shut it.

I like the imagery that God now uses to comfort his people. Think of them as they were marched off by their enemies, out of Jerusalem and down the road to Babylon; heads fallen and spirits broken. 'Now it's going to be different,' says God. 'I'm going to put an end to that opposition so that you can lift up your head and march upright through life.' My brother, my sister, I must not suppose that in any area of your life you have known recent defeat, but if one heart knows another, sometimes the memory of the past would cause us to go with our heads hanging down. But we have forgiveness through Christ; and almighty God is on our side and with us in the work of repair and restoration. In the face of all your enemies you may lift up your head, for the victory is and shall at last be ours.

Future Prospects

And now there follows a lovely vision. Says Zechariah,

I lifted up my eyes, and saw, and behold a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof. (2:1–2)

Now this young man, whoever he was, like the woman in the gospels who suffered from haemorrhage, has suffered many things at the hands of the expositors and the commentators—it happens sometimes to biblical characters! They have said what a narrow-minded young man he must have been, going out to measure Jerusalem City, whereas had he only known the heart of God, God had far bigger things for him than just rebuilding Jerusalem City. For God now says, 'I'm not going to have a city simply with literal walls. It shall be inhabited as a city without walls for the multitude of the inhabitants and of the prosperity that I shall bring upon them.' And thus they would have denied him all the fun of measuring up the city!

Yet, if I am reading it right, the young man was merely carrying out in faith the promise that God had given earlier, 'Yet shall a line be drawn upon Jerusalem.' Surely God was going to do more than rebuild it, but he was at least going to rebuild it. In my book there's nothing wrong with a young man going out to measure it all up. Take the young couple that have got their first house, their first apartment. It's a bit of a wreck to be sure, but it's their first one. They can't afford a new one, so they've got this place that's a little bit broken down—the damp is coming here and the floors are rotten there. But they go down many a night in their spare time and they're measuring it up. The man is thinking of what he could do here to the

floorboards, and the dear woman is thinking what curtains would look nice and what bit of furniture, if they could afford it one day, would go there. It's not merely the fun of the completed thing, but the fun of measuring it up and imagining what it's going to be, and then working at it and seeing at last the thing come into place.

My brother, my sister, we're not in glory yet, you don't need me to tell you that. But there's a great deal of fun in measuring up what God is yet going to do for us. Get out your measuring tape right now and let your imagination, under God's Holy Spirit, enrich your faith. What you're going to be like one of these days. For now I think not of ancient Jerusalem City and how it was restored as a dwelling place of God. Nor do I think of the Jerusalem City above, which is the mother of us all. That was never in ruins, thank God, and never shall be. I'm thinking of my little life, and yours, that God Almighty has graciously undertaken to use as a temple of his presence. I know you'll tell me that, as by his grace he grants you to be strengthened in your heart by his spirit and Christ takes up his residence ever increasingly in your personality, it will go beyond all that we could ask or think. It would defy your powers to measure what is the length and breadth and height and depth of this great mystery. And for all that, there's no harm in imagining some of it, is there?

If you should see an angel, like John the apostle was given to see an angel, suddenly appearing and sitting on the seat nearby, your first reaction would be to grovel in the dust at the sight of such excellence. But that brother or sister who is sitting next to you at this moment, if you could see them as they shall be when the Lord has come; when God's work in their heart is finished and they are totally conformed to the image of his Son, they will be princes and princesses in the royal family of God. If you could see the glory that they shall be, you'd do more than grovel at their feet.

The trouble so often is that we don't have the imagination to see our brothers and sisters as they shall be. We allow ourselves too much to look at the limitations of what they are now and eat our souls with criticism, instead of feeding our hope with God's glorious promises. I know you'll say to me, 'Come down from those dizzy heights of imagination and theorising and come to the stern realities of life. I need your rebuke, for psychologically I'm an escapist you know! But don't rob me of all my hope, will you? We are saved in and by hope. It's the hope in my heart of what I shall be, by God's grace, that keeps me going now. Or else I'd have given up long ago.

If you will allow me to diverge, I love that passage which is the coming together of chapters 14 and 15 in Numbers. Israel had tramped across the wilderness, come at last to the promised land and then decided they didn't want to go in. (Odd, wouldn't it be, if somebody got to the verge of heaven and then decided that heaven wasn't good enough and they didn't want to go in?) Anyway, then God said he must discipline them and they must wait for forty years before the nation would go in. In their arrogance they went up without the presence of God to storm the promised land and of course the kings came out and chased them away. And as Numbers 14 comes to its end, it paints that gloomy picture of Israel with their backs turned to the promised land, running as hard as their little legs will take them away from it.

But then chapter 15 opens calmly with the words of the Lord, 'Moses, speak unto the children of Israel and say, "When you be come into the land and reap its harvest."' Oh, the magnificent grace of God, though long years of discipline intervened for the nation. When

Moses spoke that command to them, 'When you be come into the land and reap its harvest, then you shall do this, that and the other', it went home to the heart of many an Israelite. As he went to sleep that night he said, 'Well the nation will one day get in after all, won't it?' And he began to dream of cornfields and barley ripening in the sun, and thought of the days when they would gather the harvest. When he woke up the next day, he was in the wilderness, of course. But the vision he had seen of the purposes of God made the next few miles of the desert a bit easier to tramp. So it is with us. Measure it, it'll go beyond your measurement, the length and breadth and height and depth of God's eternal plan for you. The vision of what you shall be will be your hope, your saving hope, in long days of difficult restoration.

The presence of God

And then God adds a delightful promise in verses 5 and 6. We refer to literal Jerusalem and the Lord saying, 'What I'm going to do is in fact beyond your measurement. For I will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and I will be the glory in the midst of her.' Actually, literal Jerusalem was built again with literal walls, with God's approval. But Israel had occasion to learn throughout its history that literal walls, however strong, were no ultimate protection for Israel against her enemies. So said our Lord centuries later, when he stood outside the city and wept over it saying, 'Oh, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you, but you would not? Your city is left to you desolate. The days will come when your enemies will cast up a mound against your walls and fortifications' (see Matt 23:37-38; Luke 19:43). The walls and fortifications of a city from which the glory of the Lord has departed will never be adequate protection against the ravage of the enemy. We may be allowed to translate the whole thing into our own experience, not merely for us personally, but for the churches of which we are members. What ultimately is their protection, but the presence of the Lord?

They were sterling days that Luke records in the beginnings of the church. Yet they who study his book of the Acts may at first find themselves wondering why Luke chooses to devote three very large paragraphs in the opening section of his work to the mistakes and faults of the early church, reminding his readers successively first of Judas and his betrayal of the Lord; of Ananias and Sapphira and their hypocrisy; and of the selfishness of the Hebrew Christians, who neglected the widows of the Hellenists in the daily administration. But even as Luke, in his honesty, records at length the grave faults of the early church in its very infant days, yet he does record marvellous things. We think of that severe and summary judgment coming upon Ananias and Sapphira, because the living God was there; and it is written that 'of the rest, dared no man join them' (Acts 5:13).

Would that we knew something of the reality, the solemnity, the wonder of the living God in our churches. They're not entertainment parlours. The presence of the living God in all his glory brings with it the ever-present possibility of his discipline of his people. I think sometimes we have lost our sense of what a church really should be; the honour, the dignity, the awe of knowing the living God in our midst.

Jerusalem needed the walls, but the walls weren't God. 'Not only shall I be the wall of protection around her,' says God, 'I will be the glory in the midst of her.' What good is

having walls if you've got nothing much inside worth protecting anyway? The Lord should be the glory in the midst of her: God give us to know it in our day and generation. One has met and does sometimes still meet those who will tell you, 'Well now, look here, not too much of the word of God, you'll lose the people.' I remember in my youth, I used to be called to minister the word of God at what was then called 'rallies'. The meeting would start at seven o'clock and by seven fifty we were still grinding through the preliminaries: the word of God had to wait and take second place. Does God still want to be the glory in the midst of his people? I guess he does. Hear our blessed Lord, 'I stand at the door and knock,' says he. 'If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and I will dine with him, and he with me' (Rev 3:20).

How is it possible, my brothers and sisters, that we with our murky past and faltering present, shall mean something to God; to be before him and he find satisfaction in us? And yet it is so, and shall be so. For in Christ we have been chosen that we should be before him now and eternally. If that is what restoration is, it is restoration indeed.

Restoration of Worship and Witness

We begin our study this morning by reading from Zechariah 3:

And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to be his adversary. And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; yea the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take the filthy garments from off him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with rich apparel. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments; and the angel of the LORD stood by. And the angel of the LORD protested unto Joshua saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts: If thou wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge, then also thou shalt judge my house, and shall also keep my courts, and I will give thee a place of access among these that stand by. Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou and thy fellows that sit before thee; for they are men which are a sign: for, behold, I will bring forth my servant the Branch. For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; upon one stone are seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree. (vv. 1-10)

May God give us good understanding of his word.

Hitherto we have been concentrating our attention on the glorious fact that God is a God of restoration, who loves to restore his people. Yesterday we spent a few moments listening to the definition and description of restoration that God gives us in the opening verses of this prophecy. It is not a question merely of being restored and taking up a correct position. Israel had already done that at the point that Zechariah's prophecy opened. They had returned from Babylon. They had returned to the land of promise.

True restoration goes further than the adoption of a true position. It is a question of our relationship with the Lord. 'Return unto me,' says the Lord, 'and I will return unto you.' Of course there is a sense in which God had need to return to Israel. Ezekiel had stood by to see that heart stopping sight of the glory of the Lord, the presence of the living God, lifted up from his sanctuary and, as though in regret and hesitation, pausing by the threshold of the house, pausing on the Mount of Olives, as reluctantly the divine presence came to his

decision. He could no longer tolerate to be amongst Israel and left their house to them desolate. Oh, what an appalling thing to have the outer shell of religiosity and to have lost the presence of the Lord. In that sense of course, as individual believers, we are promised that he will never leave us or forsake us, though we do well to remember the warning of our blessed Lord to the first of his seven churches in Asia Minor. It is possible for a church to have its candlestick removed. For all that, it is surely possible in our lives as believers to know periods when the Lord's presence seems to have been removed; when we're left to toil on with the external routine of our spiritual lives and the glory seems to have departed.

All the great saints down the ages have talked of such times, so I suppose we need not be surprised if in moments of trial and difficulty and opposition, sometimes thick, dark clouds intervene, obscuring the shining face of our Lord and our awareness of it. What delight it is when the clouds depart. When, through the intercessions of our blessed Lord, the tribulation is brought to its end, our wayward hearts are restored to the Lord and, supreme joy above all else, the sense of the Lord's presence is restored. What is life if the light of the Lord's presence seems lost to us? But if this is a description of restoration that we return to the Lord and the sense of the Lord's presence is made real again in our hearts, then it leads us inevitably to the matters that now confront us in chapters 3 and 4 of this prophecy, the visions that stand central to this part of Zechariah's work.

Restoration of worship and witness

Chapters 3 and 4 contain visions concerned in one way or another with the temple of the Lord. Chapter 3 concerns itself with the office of the high priest in his official ministry in the temple of the Lord on behalf of the people of God as their representative. Chapter 4 deals with the civil governor of Israel, Zerubbabel, as he organises the people in their rebuilding of the temple of the Lord. The symbol that is taken for us here is not so much the high priest and his official robes, but the candlestick with its never-dying light of testimony to the living God and, in particular, testimony to the world. The temple of old had this double function and it reminds us of what our double function is.

Our glorious privilege as the people of God is to be concerned as a holy and a royal priesthood to exercise that exalted privilege of the worship of almighty God. This will stand first in any restoration. To be made aware of the glory of the presence of God is to find ourselves summoned forthwith to that wonderful privilege of ministering to God and exercising our holy priesthood before him.

To be restored to the Lord will, in the second place, inevitably lead us to fulfil our responsibility to witness for the Lord. Israel held that responsibility and we should never underestimate what God did through them. We who are Christians, and are inclined to concentrate on the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, should not forget what a powerful testimony for almighty God Judaism provided in its temple in the ancient world. They were a uniquely odd people in the ancient world and the nations got to know about them—that curious people who had a temple in which there was no image. That to start with was an extraordinary thing. Would that Christendom had continued in that strain all down its years.

And then they discovered that Israel worshipped a God who was unseen and, moreover, a God who was concerned with morality. If, in the ancient world, you wanted to know about ethics and morality you didn't go to the priesthood. The priesthood, generally speaking in many a nation, were people who paid God his rates and taxes and persuaded God to be on your side, against your enemies, so long as you kept him in good supply of sacrifices. The morality of the thing was largely irrelevant. There has been a perilous tendency in the human race to divorce the worship of God, as they have conceived of it, from the question of holiness and morality and righteousness. Israel's God stood virtually unique amongst the ancient world. The almighty Creator God, transcendent above his creation, was a God who insisted that those who worshipped him observed his holy law of morality and ethics.

So Israel stood amongst the nations as a witness to the true God and, what is more, a witness to the purpose of God in history. No other nation had it like that. Israel did not merely deal with timeless truths. It stood in its tiny Jerusalem and in its unique temple, proclaiming that the great God of the universe had a purpose in history and that purpose was vested in the role given to Israel. And it stood with its finger pointing forward to the coming of the Saviour of the world, brightening this dreary world with the glorious promise that human life is not for nothing. It is not going round in mere circles. There is a point. There is a purpose. There is a hope. And the transcendent Lord has already intervened in history and is guiding history to its glorious consummation.

What a privilege Israel had, and in their better days they fulfilled it. Watch, if you will, even in that late time of the Acts of the Apostles, the chancellor of the exchequer from Ethiopia, coming up in his chariot, sick of the idolatry of the pagan nation and cynical of its philosophies, coming up to Jerusalem to worship. Here was Israel doing its task among the nations. Happy days they were when God from time to time restored his people to this twin task in their holy temple. The glorious privilege of acting as God's priests, to give him their worship and their praise and to be conformed to his standards of holiness; and then to be a witness for him in the darkness of heathendom. I needn't spell out to you that that is our privilege and if Israel were privileged with these things, we more so. And, through restoration, it will for all of us have that same effect.

A tarnished priest

But now consider Israel's high priest at this juncture. We are told that Zechariah saw Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord. We note how many times in this chapter the presence and the words and the actions of the angel of the Lord are mentioned. When we come to chapter 4 and its vision, it will no longer be so much the ministry of the angel of the Lord; it will be the ministry of the Holy Spirit. These twin, great ministries that we enjoy so much today, the ministry of the Son of God himself and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. But here was Zechariah standing before the angel of the Lord. Let us pause in our imagination once more to sense the exalted privilege. That a man, six foot of mere clay, should be admitted to the high and holy ranks and stand before the exalted persons of deity. Who shall express it or comprehend it? Yet to this ministry we are called.

Judge then the abysmal state and condition of the man when now it is perceived, as he stands in that holy place and before such holy personage, that his garments are filthy. Not only the garments that symbolise his own personal state, but the garments that indicate his holy office. Let us think for a moment then of his office. In order that the people of God might worship God acceptably and with godly fear, God had provided them with a high priest, and the New Testament comments that every high priest is taken from among men and must be able to have compassion and to bear gently with the ignorant and those that are out of the way. For if ever God's people were to worship him, they would need a priest to come out in all his glorious garments and represent God to them, and help the people in their appreciation of God.

Worship isn't just me getting excited and having a wonderful emotional high—over what I don't quite know, but I'm having a wonderful emotional time anyway! If you took me round an art gallery and showed me some glorious painting and I started to dance and say, 'Oh, how wonderful it is', and I'd got my eyes shut; and then you took me to some abominable, wretched painting and I said, 'How wonderful it is', and I'd still got my eyes shut, you might doubt whether it was art I was appreciating, or whether I were just indulging some emotional fantasy.

Worship is not a question of working up wonderful bursts of emotion and enjoying them. True worship is my response to the reality of almighty God, to the wonder and the beauty of his holiness. Hence Israel's high priests in those early days were provided with garments of glory and beauty as they came out from God. You will say, 'What are mere garments and a bit of gold thread and a bit of blue, purple and scarlet and fine-twined linen?' As Christians you see that it's only a picture and a type. But in those early days of man's spiritual childhood it did convey something. You read of the Hellenistic Jews in Egypt, for instance, and their rapturous description of the effect produced upon them when they went as tourists up to Jerusalem and the high priest came out in all his robes of splendour. No scruffy old high priest this, in denims and jeans or something, but a high priest in his robes of glory and splendour. Even those humble symbols mediated something of the glory of God; and men felt they must prostrate themselves before such an exhibition of glory. And as they learnt about the glory of God, there was their glorious, but kindly and compassionate, high priest who had mercy on those that were ignorant and out of the way.

Here comes a clodhopper farmer from Galilee. He's come down to Jerusalem and, dear man, he has a tremendously good intention to worship almighty God. He's got the best pig off the farm under his arm and he's bringing it with all the joy on his face to offer it on the altar of God in Jerusalem. You've got to be careful how you treat the dear man. He means it well, but offer a pig on God's altar? 'No, my dear man,' the priest has got to say, 'that won't quite do. Yes, I know the Greek gods seem to like pigs, but your God doesn't. In spite of all your good intentions, let me not hurt your feelings, but we shall have to change that offering.' For worship is not just offering to God what we feel we like. It is offering to God what God has said he likes. You may think it a bit curious that almighty God should argue the difference between a pig and a sheep, yet behind it there were deeper things. God was teaching his people the beauty of holiness and conduct; of standards that are acceptable to

God, and that which he abominates, not merely at the physical level but at the moral and the spiritual level too.

See now a disaster. There stood Israel's high priest, with his garments filthy. We shall judge the seriousness of it insofar as we have apprehended the majesty and the glory of God; insofar as we have apprehended that the chief function of our worship is not so that I shall have a good time, or you either. The function of our worship is that we shall minister to God's pleasure.

Not only did the priest stand before the Lord in his filthy garments, but there was Satan at his right hand, as his accuser. That relentless accuser of the brethren, calling God's attention to the failure of his official and of the people that the priest represented, and pointing out to God that anything this priest could do must prove unacceptable to the standards of almighty God. The fire of God's judgment had almost consumed him when the voice of God's grace is heard breaking the silence and rebuking the accuser, as the arm of divine mercy snatches the brand from the burning. A dirty, smoking, filthy, sooty brand from a fire, with all its horrible stench in the nostrils of almighty God. And he gives to the adversary, Satan, the reason, 'I have chosen him.' The Lord that has chosen Jerusalem. As we stand by, what revelation it gives us of the grace of almighty God: that God should choose such a stinking, oily, sooty firebrand to have the privilege of ministering in the thrice-holy presence. Normally it was the smell of incense in Israel's temple that greeted the nostrils of almighty God. Now it was the stench of the sooty burning firebrand, and God had chosen him.

A restored priest

As we read it, our minds irresistibly go to ourselves and try to account for the enormous grace of God towards us who were almost being burnt in the refuse dump of eternity.

Chosen not for good in me,
Wakened up from wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Saviour's side,
By the Spirit sanctified,
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,
By my love, how much I owe.¹

I tell you what it's done for your ministry, my brother and sister, and what it will do for all eternity. It will be the end of your parading your virtues and excellences in the courts of God. But it will increase infinitely the wonder of your appreciation of a God like that who could rescue a burning, sooty, dirty, stinking firebrand and choose him or her for this high office of priestly ministry.

And then the angel of the Lord took up his gracious work:

¹ Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–43), 'When this passing world is done'.

And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying Take the filthy garments from off him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and will clothe thee with rich apparel. (v. 4)

Fit accompaniments for the presence of God, given to the high priest as representative of God's people.

A mitre for the priest

At this point Zechariah got so excited that he forgot he was meant to be listening to a vision and he joined in and said, 'Let them set a fair mitre on his head as well, God.' It's nice when God's people get enthusiastic and begin making suggestions to God! He got caught up in the excitement. I think at that point the angel of the Lord smiled a bit, perhaps behind his hand, for here was Zechariah entering into the glory of it and the wonder of God's grace. 'Set a mitre on his head.' Holiness to the Lord, that he might bear the iniquity of the holy things (see Exod 28:36–38).

What man wouldn't cry out if he knew the depth of his own heart and his own inherent unsuitability to be a priest before God, or even to be among the people of God? You too I think would shout out, 'Oh, let them put a mitre on his head that he for us might bear the responsibility of ministering on our behalf in those courts above, to bear the iniquity of the holy things.' For how shall I bear the responsibility of my high calling, to minister with my childish prattle before almighty God? And they put the mitre, it was the best that could be done at the time, upon Joshua's head—'Holiness to the Lord' that he might bear for Israel the burden of their iniquity, and they clothed him with garments. But then the angel of the Lord protested to Joshua and said,

Thus saith the LORD of hosts: If thou wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge, then thou also shalt judge my house, and shalt also keep my courts, and I will give thee a place of access among these that stand by. (v. 7)

Thus he was to represent the people before God, to represent God before the people, and to train his people in the responsibilities of holiness.

Our great high priest

We read here that 'the angel of the Lord stood by' (v. 5). I wonder what he was thinking. Surely if our New Testament is any guide, he was thinking down the ages to the time when Israel's imperfect priesthood would eventually be laid aside, as a child lays aside its early lesson books and enters the great realities of life. For the angel of the Lord, none other than the Son of God, must even in those moments have been looking down the centuries when he should come to take up the robes of our great high priest and bear the iniquity of our holy things. To express the Father to us, to make known the name of God in the midst of the congregation, until our hearts grow aflame with their life for God and admiration of his glory and his holiness; and then in turn to lead back the praise of his people to God.

So Joshua is now told, 'Thou and thy fellows that sit before thee . . . behold, I will bring forth my servant, the Branch. For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; upon one stone are seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the LORD of hosts, and will remove the iniquity of that land in one day' (vv. 8–9). And our minds go to our great high priest. How shall I fulfil my role to God? How shall I stand in those unsullied courts of glory and offer praise that can be acceptable by the standards of almighty God?

Thank God for the gospel of our high priest, who has come out to make God known to us; has mercy on us who are ignorant and out of the way; and has entered in as our representative and now stands ready to minister on our behalf in the courts of the almighty God:

Having therefore such a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (see Heb 10:21–22)

One day Israel shall be restored. One day she shall fulfil the high and holy office to which she was called. 'You shall be unto me a holy priesthood, a peculiar treasure' (Exod 19:5). Today we anticipate that role and in higher circles, called to stand in the immediate presence of God and minister to him.

A witness to the world

But this is not our only ministry, for the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem had a double function. It was the centre to which Israel came to offer their praise and worship to God. It was also meant to be the centre from which Israel and her priesthood showed forth the virtues of him that had called them out of darkness into light and made them his peculiar people, that the knowledge of God might be spread abroad in all the earth. And so now, as we pass from chapter 3 to chapter 4, we remain in the environs of the temple to see God's powers of restoration, not only in the priesthood in their times of worshipping the Lord, but in the priesthood in terms of witnessing to men. The garments of the high priest remind us of our Lord at God's right hand,

For us he wears the mitre,
Where holiness shines bright;
For us his robes are whiter
Than heaven's unsullied light.²

And he it is who takes our hand and trains us junior priests; trains us in our stumbling acts of worship, in our childish adorations, and leads us into the deeper things of God. And when our voices fail in their adequacy, himself standing in the midst of the people of God, he leads the worship of God on our behalf.

² Mary Bowley (1813–56), 'The holiest now we enter'.

Restoration of Personal Holiness

Let us read some selected passages from our prophet Zechariah.

And the word of the LORD came unto me saying, Take of them of the captivity, even of Heldai, of Tobijah and of Jedaiah; and come thou the same day, and go into the house of Josiah the son of Zephaniah, whither they are come from Babylon; yea, take of them silver and gold, and make crowns, and set them upon the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and speak unto him saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold, the man whose name is the Branch; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both. And the crowns shall be to Helem, and to Tobijah, and to Jedaiah, and to Hen the son of Zephaniah, for a memorial in the temple of the LORD. And they that are far off shall come and build in the temple of the LORD, and ye shall know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto you. And this shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God. (6:9–15)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt, the foal of an ass. (9:9)

And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall the LORD be one, and his name one. (14:9) And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles. (14:16)

May God give us good understanding of his word.

In the first major part of the prophecy of Zechariah there are, as we have been noticing, eight visions given to the prophet to describe the restoration of Israel by their God. Yesterday we concentrated on the two centre visions and found that they bring us to the very heart of this matter of restoration. They were chapters that eventually talked to us about the blessed priesthood of our Lord Jesus and, secondly, about the ministry of God's Holy Spirit. Those two divine ministries lie ever at the heart of all the restoration of the people of God.

We watched Joshua the high priest standing before the Lord and saw his wretched condition, both personally and, more particularly, in his official position as high priest and representative of the nation, leader of their worship to God. We saw the strength of Satan's

accusation against him. Then we noticed the marvel of God's great mercy and the constancy of his choice. He chose his people and he chose Jerusalem, not merely in the early days when, with success, they came out of Egypt and Aaron was appointed in all the glory of his beautiful garments. But that same God still chose Jerusalem, even in those moments when their high priest was now standing before him in his utter failure, both as a person and in his official capacity—his robes no longer resplendent and glorious, but dirty and filthy.

Oh the mercies of God. Had it depended upon us, how long would any of us have occupied any office at all that God in his mercy had given to us? We notice him restored, not only as an individual, but restored to his office. For how could Israel be restored if their priest wasn't restored? And we watched Zechariah's excitement as he added his own suggestion that they put a fair mitre upon the priest's head, that he might bear the iniquity of his people once more; and in the strength of his person and in the strength of his office, carry the people of God and maintain them fit to worship the Lord.

Restoration of our walk

We should notice now, as we pass in our resume, the condition laid down in that chapter by the angel of the Lord. 'Thus saith the LORD of hosts: If thou wilt walk in my ways and if thou wilt keep my charge, then thou also shall judge my house, and shall also keep my courts, and I will give thee a place of access among these that stand by' (3:7). Restored to his office and to his high privilege, and beautified with the forgiveness and reinstatement by God, yet he was not to engage merely in self-indulgence, like Eli had in times gone by. You will remember the disgraceful episode of Eli and his high priesthood, taking advantage of the grace of God. He who had been chosen to lead the people, discipline the people, control the people and make the people aware of the glories of God and of the behaviour that is incumbent upon them as priests to the Lord. Eli had allowed his sons to grow up self-indulgent, hideously sinful men who saw the priesthood merely as a way of indulging their own satisfactions and were interested in spiritual things only so long as they ministered to their own pleasure; they forgot God and his glory and descended to the most shameful iniquity and self-indulgence.

Restoration by the grace of God will never mean that. So Joshua, now restored to his office, is called upon to execute the charge of God, to be a judge in his courts, to train and to discipline the people of God that he might train them in what is acceptable to God and train them in behaviour that is well pleasing to God. At this juncture we do well to remember the challenging words of Hebrews 12, 'We are not come to Sinai, all on smoke at the presence of the glory of God, so that Moses himself did exceedingly quake and the people requested that the voice should not speak to them again' (see vv. 18–21). What are we come to? Something less majestic? Something less awe-inspiring? Well of course not. We are come to the heavenly Jerusalem, Zion of God, and to all that august assembly of the ministers of God and the various groups of his redeemed. We come to serve him whose voice once shook the earth and yet, as he promised that when he speaks again, his voice will shake not the earth only, but the heaven so that all those things that can be removed are removed. And we are left with what is abiding and eternal. Seeing then we have received a kingdom that cannot be removed, let us seek grace that we may serve him with godly fear, for our God is a consuming fire. We shall

not increase our joy if we lose sight of the awe-inspiring majesty of the God whose priests we have been called to be.

As we thought of these things, our hearts went eagerly to the fact that Joshua, restored to his office, became in that far-off day a foreshadowing of the coming of our great high priest who, in one day and by one sacrifice, made it possible not only for Israel's sin to be removed, but our sin too. And by one offering he has perfected forever them that are sanctified, and now stands in the presence of God for us, carrying us, his junior priests.

Restoration by the power of the Holy Spirit

Still today he faithfully keeps his charge. Restoration, what shall it mean? Our minds go this morning to those sacred scenes glowing with the holiness of God, given to us in the visions of John in Revelation 1–3, of the seven golden candlesticks; and in their midst, one like unto the Son of Man clothed in his priestly garment down to the foot. Keeping the charge of God, moving in the courts of the Lord, investigating his junior priests, calling them to heel, praising their good works, seeing with his penetrating eye their shortcomings and sins and calling on them to repent that they might join in their priestly office of being bright and burning lampstands for God in this ungodly world and crooked generation.

And then we thought of that second ministry, led by Zerubbabel, the civic leader of the people. We read of it in chapter 4. Zerubbabel is charged with the task of rebuilding the temple, amidst the opposition of all the little nations that were constantly snapping at Israel's heels and against all the opposition of the mighty imperialist power of the time. And the glorious gospel message coming from God through the vision given to Zechariah is 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD' (v. 6). As we read it this morning, we hear it not merely as gospel, but once again as exhortation. Zerubbabel was to be both encouraged and exhorted by that famous statement. There in the vision he stood, and doubtless Joshua too, as those olive trees that poured the oil into the vessel of testimony. Privileged by God to be the channels of God's Holy Spirit to the people of Israel, sons of oil, and we in our little way rejoice in the marvellous privilege that God has given us. Given you, my sister, my brother, to be the vessels of God's Holy Spirit to that testimony where God has made you responsible.

The message is gospel that says that it is God's Holy Spirit that maintains the testimony against all the opposition, and assures us that he who has begun the good work, will continue it. 'Zerubbabel, your hands have laid the foundation of the house of the Lord. Your hands will finish it.' What a confidence we may have in the Lord. I repeat the promise with which Paul comforted his own heart as he sat in jail thinking of his work in Philippi, begun by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And he saw evidence in the lives of the believers that 'he who had begun the good work in them, would continue it, even unto the Day of the Lord' (Phil 1:6).

Channels only

But the word of promise is also a word of exhortation. Channels must remain only channels. Listen to Paul talking to his fellow believers in Corinth and he's discussing the matter of

building the temple of God. A different temple from Israel's temple, whether Israel's temple is past or future, and whichever one you're thinking about, this was a present day temple built for God in Corinth. And Paul as a wise master builder had laid the foundation. Other people were building on it, in slight danger of exalting themselves from being channels to being the centre of the temple—dividing up the believers under their various personalities and names, and getting the believers to glory in men and put their confidence in men. That would be a disastrous thing to do and a thing that inevitably destroys its own objective. As Paul remarks in 1 Corinthians 2, 'No one knoweth the things of God save the Spirit of God' (v. 11). That is always true. That is true now.

My brother and sister, I stand here as a feeble channel of the Lord's grace and I speak to you the words of God you know right well. But unless something else is simultaneously happening, unless God Almighty chooses by his spirit to reveal himself to you, then nothing really happens. That is of the essence. God is not a thing like an atom. Atoms are very easily understood! All you need is to be a genius like Einstein and then have an old cyclotron or something, whatever they call it, that costs a few hundred million dollars, and then you get hold of the atom and you put it through the machine and the poor atom hasn't a chance. It has to yield up its secrets and let you pry into its very heart, because it's only a thing. I rejoice to tell you that I'm superior to an atom; even me! You could be an Einstein and put me through your machine and you would find out all the chemistry of me and the shape of my toenails and the colour of my hair and how fast my heart beats. But you would never know me, because I'm not a thing. Unless I choose to discover myself to you, you won't know me.

Here is God's holy word and you can know it from A to Z like the Pharisees did, using every technique at your disposal. But unless God pleases to reveal himself to you, you'll know nothing. How does he reveal himself? In his inscrutable mercy and grace and condescension, he uses us all as channels. And the vital thing is: not by might, our might, or power or intelligence or wisdom or anything, but it is by God's Holy Spirit that God makes himself known and maintains his testimony. Hence it comes about that God often uses the weak things to confound the mighty and the things that are not, to confound those that are (see 1 Cor 1:27–28). In our day and generation we need to listen in, for the issue at stake is not whether I'm clever; the issue at stake is whether, in this materialistic world, it is true that there is a supernatural transcendent God. Only the voice of his Holy Spirit can demonstrate that that is true.

Restoration in our personal and home life

We follow now swiftly through the remaining visions. If Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest are in unison to be used of God to revive the testimony and build the temple, the house of the Lord, then visions 6 and 7 remind those people that if they would build the house of the Lord it has implications for their own houses. And so he is given a vision in chapter 5 of a flying scroll that, flying round, enters into the houses of iniquitous sinners and destroys them. How will we read the vision? As a threat, warning Israel to close their doors and bolt them in case the scroll comes flying in through their window or something? Well surely not. It's not a threat. It's a promise. Oh, for the day when it will be finally fulfilled and evil

eliminated from among the people of God; that you have been taught the grace of God, made channels of his Holy Spirit and joined in the work of building the house of the Lord. Do you not at this moment in your hearts pray silently to the Lord, 'I wish you'd send a scroll like that my way'? That the Bible, God's holy word, would cease to be merely a book. 'Let it come, Lord. Let it enter into the floor and the rafters of my home and into every fibre of my being. Lord, use it to eliminate all that is not well.' How would they in that day build the house of the Lord and be a testimony among the nations if, in their own homes and houses, unworthy things still prevail?

We read in the book of Nehemiah of the occasion when Nehemiah came back from one of his business duties to find that in his absence, when the people had built the temple to the glory of God amongst the nations, old Tobijah had moved in with his household stuff. Well, he was related to one of the prominent Israelites and you couldn't make a fuss, could you? Well Nehemiah made a fuss. 'We've not rebuilt this temple to have this kind of thing going on. Get out,' he said, and booted the man out and all his household stuff. How shall I, in my day, build the house of the Lord and be a testimony for God amongst the people if my own home is not governed by God's word, and his gracious disciplines are daily releasing me from the power of sin?

This is followed by another vision much talked of by the experts, and I'm not one of them, about the ephah and that terrible woman 'Wickedness', thrust down in the ephah, and the whole thing transported to the plain of Shinar to build a house for her there. Well that got her out of Israel and that was one mercy. What's the good of having Israel out of Babylon if you can't get Babylon out of Israel? And if the ephah symbolises at all the commercial life of the nation, we observe, for all our sympathy for our beloved Jewish fathers, that so often the testimony of the Lord in their hand has been severely compromised by their attitudes in business. We who are Christians can scarce throw too big a stone. How shall I build testimony for God if in my business life the ways of Babylon still hold me?

And with that we come to the final vision. God has promised that one day all things Babylonian shall be removed from Israel and Wickedness be taken to her own region and her house built there, ready for the final judgments of God. We who live in this advanced age see it going on around us. God in his wisdom will allow evil to come to its full flood tide before he eventually destroys it. And already the movements are afoot to separate out the great issues at stake into their respective camps. The man of sin and the evil woman of Babylon on the one side, and Christ and his faithful people of all kinds on the other. And even in our day, we need to stand clear and be wise as to what the current state of affairs is leading to.

'Realistic' restoration

In the final vision, as in the first, we see once more the horses of God's administrators in the earth and they cry, 'Behold, they that go toward the north country have quieted my spirit in the north country' (6:8). Some of the expert commentators tell us that this is a prophecy of God's final judgment upon Babylon and that the verse should be translated 'They have quieted my wrath by executing that wrath upon Babylon.' Maybe so. Maybe it is a reference to the judgment that fell upon Babylon in historic times and Israel was given to see at least

the beginnings of God's judgment on that nation which once had held them in its grim captivity. But whatever it means, in Zechariah's day it wasn't the final putting down of evil, and yet God announced that his spirit is quieted and put at rest. If you compare it with what was said in the first vision, perhaps you will see something of the realism of God.

In the first vision, as the man stood in the myrtle trees, there was a fearful and frightful complacency—the whole earth at rest, and even the Israelites themselves settled down into a desperate complacency. No movement for God. No progress. No real concern about the poverty of spirit and the brokenness of Israel. By the intercessions of the angel of the Lord that complacency was broken and spiritual energy set loose that got Israel moving again, to restore the priesthood and restore the temple, and begin the long drawn out work of delivering God's people from evil.

The God who is against complacency is a God of realism and he sets realistic objectives for his people. Here in Zechariah's day, not the final triumph. That would in fact take centuries to come, but there had been movement and there had been progress. Many long miles are yet to be covered, but God can announce that in some sense his spirit is quieted and at rest. That may not mean much to you, but it means volumes to me. You don't need to tell me that I'm a long way off heaven, and I don't mean geographically. (I mean the United States of course: I don't know your view on how near heaven you think it is!) But I mean in my spiritual experience, and building the temple of the Lord, and in the execution of my priesthood and the pursuit of holiness. You don't need to tell me I'm not in heaven yet. I stand with the apostle, though miles behind him, and say that I have not already attained.

How far off the goal seems to be some days, and the question arises, 'Shall I ever get there?' And then I consider all the mercies of what God has already done, all the graciousness of God. As a wise teacher and father, he takes us by realistic stages and says, 'Yes, there is some progress and I can make known my satisfaction.' Courage, my brother and sister, granted that there is within you a heart to go on with God and not rest in complacency. Don't vex your souls too much that you have not yet attained what, for the moment, are impossible goals. But as you press on, learn to draw strength and comfort and courage from this, that if you're walking with God and doing the best you know how to walk with him, and are pursuing and gaining your short-term victories, the heart of God can find satisfaction and rest for the moment in you as you are.

A missing element?

With that, the eight visions come to an end. If we have been paying close attention to them, we shall now have a very big question in our hearts. Eight visions talking about the restoration of Israel, about the restoration of the priesthood, about the restoration of the temple and about the restoration of Israel to the land. But surely the visions haven't ended, have they? For there is a huge thing still missing. Nothing has been said yet about the restoration of the king. How could it be restoration without the king? You say, 'Well, there have been references to the Branch and you ought to know your prophets well enough to know that the Branch in certain prophets is another name for the king.' Yes, I know, but that

can hardly satisfy me. I want a whole vision on it, of the restoration of the king. You can't have full restoration unless the kingdom is restored, can you?

Hadn't God promised it many times explicitly through prophets like Jeremiah that when the restoration took place the temple would be restored, the land would be restored, the priesthood would be restored, the people would be restored, the kingdom would be restored and he would set over them his servant David? You approach those prophecies with the wisdom of hindsight and the benefit of the experience of long ages of history. But to the early people that returned, how high their expectations must have been that now, very soon, God would restore the kingdom to Israel. But all eight visions went by and there was no word of that.

But we notice that at the end of chapter 6 there is an epilogue, just as there was an introduction in chapter 1 before the eight visions started. And in the epilogue we have now not a vision but a piece of history. We read of certain men that had come up to entreat the favour of the Lord. They had come from Babylon and had brought silver and gold. They are told to take this silver and gold and make crowns. Not several different crowns, but one glorious, majestic crown made out of a whole series of little crowns, one piled on top of another. See them now busy at it with their treasure. They came from Babylon with high hopes rising in their hearts. 'This is the restoration, my brethren. Let's get our silver and gold and make a crown, a big crown, and put it on . . .' I wonder what they were expecting. On whose head would they put the crown? For they had Joshua the high priest and they had Zerubbabel the civic leader. Was this going to be the moment when God would fulfil his gracious promise and restore the kingdom to Israel and to the prince of the line of David? Would they be allowed to come with their silver and gold and put it on the head of a restored king? What a thing that would be.

We read that the prophet had to take them, with their beautiful gold and silver crown, and said, 'Put it on the head of Joshua the high priest.' I wonder if their hearts sank in their boots. Well it's sunken in the boots of the literary critics of the Old Testament! They say, 'This passage can't be original. Somebody has altered it and doctored it.' First of all, misreading the Hebrew plural, they suppose there were two crowns to start with and then they say it must originally have been, 'Put it on the head of Zerubbabel', the civic leader, and crown him as prince and king in restored Israel. That was their hope and, when it didn't happen, then somebody went and doctored the text and made the second best of it, and said, 'Put it on the head of Joshua.' Those are the kind of funny tricks that some literary critics get up to in the Old Testament!

Restoration of the kingdom

The plain fact is that it was not God's purpose, intention or programme at this time to restore the kingdom to Israel. Yes, we know that in Nehemiah's day, when he began to rebuild not only the temple but the city, the little Gentile nations around accused him before the imperialist government of having intentions in his head to proclaim a king in Jerusalem and get political independence for Israel. Nehemiah was at great pains to deny the scandalous suggestion. He had no intention of crowning himself or anybody else as civic king. Israel was

to remain, and remain for centuries, under the domination of Gentile imperialist powers. It must have been a disappointment to some of them in Israel.

Of course the king did come eventually, as presently we shall see. And when our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, this was the question uppermost in the minds of the apostles. He was the risen Lord, the Christ. They said, 'Lord, is this the time you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' They have been much criticised for that question, as being unspiritual and narrow-minded men who ought to have risen to bigger ambitions. What nonsense the criticism is. If Jesus is the Messiah, surely he has to be King? How can he be the Messiah and not reign in the end from shore to shore? How can restoration be complete until he sits on the throne of his glory?

'Is it at this time,' said the apostles, 'that you'll restore the kingdom to Israel?' They had to be told, 'No, not yet. One day it will be restored. In the meantime, you shall be my witnesses,' said our Lord. By the time Peter has got to chapter 3 of the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit has enlightened him as to the programme. He preaches to Israel their need to repent and to accept the Messiah God has appointed for them, 'whom the heaven must receive until the times of the restoration of all those things that the prophets said would be restored' (v. 21). Still we wait. Sure, in Zechariah's day they were allowed to take the crown and put it for the moment on the head of Joshua, not to make him political ruler in Israel, but in symbolic ceremony that he might become a stand-in and a foreshadowing of the coming king—the Branch, our blessed Lord, who should be both priest and king upon his throne. We have lived to see our blessed Lord risen from the dead and appointed by God a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, king and priest. But even yet he sits not on the throne of his glory. He sits upon his Father's throne and we too wait for the great time of the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit upon the throne of his glory.

You say, 'I wish it were now. I've got some silver and gold I could rake up. Would I be allowed to take my silver and gold and make a crown of it, and with my little hands place it upon the head of the Saviour when he comes to sit upon the throne of his glory? I wish I could do it now.' Take comfort from this parable and symbolic scene. They put their crown upon the head of Joshua and then it was taken off, not wasted, but put in the temple for a memorial that they in their day made a crown intended for the head of the King priest. And when the Branch, the King, the son of David, sits on the throne of his glory, shall they not take the crowns that old Heldai and Tobijah made? I don't know where they've got them now, I believe God knows, but allow me the parable. Shall they not take the crowns and the devotion of those faraway men and place those too on the head of the Branch? And shall not Heldai and Tobijah gather round the blessed Lord and say, 'Lord, you've been a long while coming. Centuries ago we hoped to see you and the hope was delayed. But Lord, while you were still away and while we waited, here are the crowns we made in hope that one day they would be put upon your head.'

Why couldn't God restore the king forthwith? Well for one reason, that Israel herself had as yet no true and full idea of what divine kingship should mean, and they had to be trained and taught. It was a long and bitter lesson. They had in their hearts that kingship meant being somebody like old Nebuchadnezzar with his big moustache and all his power and arrogance.

'Whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive?' And if he got out of bed the wrong way one morning, you were very careful what you said and did.

That idea persisted, and sometimes in some very unexpected quarters, for Zechariah in his final prophecies points us to the day when at last Jerusalem was bid to cry aloud in her joy, 'Behold, your King comes to you.' We can look back on it through the records of our gospels. That breath-taking day when it happened and the long-expected King came. If you had been standing outside the eastern gate of the temple and your eyes had looked to the Mount of Olives opposite, you would have seen, coming over the top of the mountain, the unbelievable sight of the blessed man from Nazareth with crowds of hundreds if not thousands of disciples round him, coming down the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Suddenly men's hearts realised and Jerusalem had to be told, 'Your King is coming. See him descending down the mountainside, riding upon the ass.'

The King had come. How would he change their hearts? Yes, he could have used his power and obliterated them and given up Jerusalem, and given up the planet and started somewhere else in the universe. Blown the rebels and the thieves in the temple to smithereens and have done with them. Like a man walking out on a summer's evening who is troubled by a little mosquito on his kingly forehead and slaps it into nonexistence. Not so is this King, even while we were yet his enemies. Even the learned apostles, in sight of the sacred emblems of the body and blood of Christ, were wrangling amongst themselves as to who should be the greatest. For they had that concept of kingship in their hearts that being a king meant that you bossed the most people. What kind of restoration can be built on such a concept? The whole glory of paradise will be that the divine persons shall serve. My brother and sister, hear what a wonderful thing your heaven is going to be. Why, if you could go home this night to your stately home and sit down at your table with your beautiful linen and your silver and gold, and you pressed the button and a waiter came in and served you and washed your feet and brought the dishes, you would be somebody, wouldn't you?

My brother and sister, be careful, for when you get home to heaven, the Lord will do that for you. He shall gird himself and come forth and serve you. That's what will make the millennium the millennium and what shall make heaven heaven. Like Peter, do you say that you couldn't have the blessed Lord serving you? You try to stop him! You'll find out that this is true kingship: the biggest one is the one who serves the most. Who do you think is the bigger, the pigs that get fed or the farmer that feeds them? It is really the one who serves most who is the biggest and he shall ever bear the glory, for he serves the most.

But how would he convert these ungodly rebels? How would he establish his kingdom? You wouldn't do it by just sitting on an ivory throne. You wouldn't even do it by parading the streets of Jerusalem on a donkey with all the ceremony attached. How would you do it and bring a rebel world and a rebel Jerusalem back to God? I'll tell you the story; you remember it well. The King got off his donkey. It wasn't much of a beast in your estimation. You would have come in a Mercedes Benz, I suppose. But in those days, kings came on donkeys. He got off even that transport and, going out from the upper room, he went back to the Mount of Olives and rode down on it. Not now as a king on a donkey, but coming to the place where the stones were hard, as hard as Israel's rebel hearts, the King kneeled and said, 'Not my will, but thine be done.'

By that will, and the doing of it by the blessed Saviour, we have been sanctified by the offering of the body of Christ once for all. Not otherwise can paradise be built, or sinners be saved, or Israel restored, but by the rebel being broken—through the love and mercy of God displayed when the King himself kneeled to the will of God and died for us ungodly sinners. The death of Christ was no disaster, and the final visions tell us how God has used Israel's rejection. They despised the King in their day and sold him for thirty pieces of silver, contemptuous of his attitude. We who love him and value him more than silver and gold could ever express, rejoice to hear Zechariah prophesying of the day when the King shall come in all his glory.

Israel shall look on him whom they pierced, and a fountain shall be opened to them for sin and uncleanness. All Israel shall be saved and reconciled to their true Messiah and King. And the Lord shall be King in that great day, and God will have arrived for the time being at the fulfilment of his purpose. They shall keep the last and final feast in Israel's calendar of redemption, the glorious Feast of Tabernacles. And when it happens, my brother, my sister, you shall be there. You shall see the King in his glory, and what a thing it will be.

When I see him sitting on the throne of his glory, shall I be allowed to come with my little bit of silver and gold that, in the furnace of life's experience, I have beaten and welded and engraved into a crown? My brothers and sisters, I don't flatter you; I am impressed and greatly helped as I have perceived this week again what gold and silver is represented by your wonderful devotion to Christ. How wealthy it makes me feel to see lives with all their grace, beauty, expertise, courage and faith given to the Lord. I'm sure it is not very comfortable now sometimes. But it will be lovely at last to see you coming to him in all his glory and bringing the crown that you have made from your silver and gold of sacrifice and living for Christ and saying, 'Lord, you've been a long while coming as it seemed to me, and I couldn't do it before, but in your absence this is what I was doing. I was making a crown. Let me please now put it on your head.' Oh, that would be glory, and glory that we shall be allowed to share.

The Lord encourage us, as we build a temple of the Lord in our day and at our level, to build not with wood, hay and stubble, but with gold and silver and precious stones in light of the day when the whole thing shall be complete and our blessed Lord shall enter into his glory. We shall share with him the delights of a restored earth and, one day, a new heaven as well.

And so Lord, we thank thee for thy word, for all these Old Testament prophecies. We thank thee that as we read them, we recognise in our hearts how our ancient brethren felt. We thank thee for the common devotion to Jesus Christ, thy Son and Messiah, that thou hast worked in the hearts of men of all ages. We thank thee that, even as many of these prophecies have already been fulfilled, so one day they shall all be. Be pleased now to look upon us and by thy spirit and by thy word strengthen our faith, strengthen our hope. Give us the grace and the energy not to tire, but to take every minute's worth of time and energy and all the gold and silver we have, to prepare for that great and crowning day that is coming by and by. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.