

October 5, 2025  
Return: A Call to Return to the Lord  
Zechariah 1:1-6  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction... Zechariah is the longest of the Minor Prophets but has for a long time been thought to be the most difficult book of the OT to interpret book. It's been called the "Revelation" of the OT. But, we must remind ourselves that Zechariah's audience understood his message, at least to the extent Zechariah himself understood it, and today we understand the book much better still because some of what was prophesied in this book has already come to pass during the life and ministry of Jesus.

The book of Zechariah is set after the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem during the same time as Haggai. In fact, we are told in the book of Ezra (Ezra 5:1-2) that Zechariah and Haggai, together, challenged and motivated the people to rebuild the temple and look for the fulfillment of God's promises.

Long before, Jeremiah the prophet said that Israel's exile would last for 70 years and that, afterwards, God would restore his presence in a new temple. That's when God would bring his Kingdom and the rule of the messiah over all nations. The dates at the beginning of this book tell us that the 70 years were almost up, but life back in the land was hard, and it seemed like none of these hopes were ever going to be fulfilled. The book of Zechariah offers an explanation about what went wrong.

At the center of it all, Zechariah invites us to look above the chaos of the present world and to hope for God's Kingdom which, in turn, should motivate us toward living our present lives faithfully in line with God's word, much like the book of Revelation does in the NT. That's the challenge Zechariah offers to all generations of God's people. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the word of God. [Read Passage]

The name Zechariah was a common one. It means "Yahweh remembers" and there are some 30 different Zechariah's mentioned in the Old Testament. This Zechariah was the son of Berechiah and the grandson of Iddo, one of the heads of the priestly families that returned from Babylon with Zerubbabel, the descendent of David.

The date given here makes it two months after Haggai's first message. Upon King Darius' accession to the throne in Persia a few years earlier there had been, as there often were at times of regime change, a period of instability in the Persian Empire. Darius put down several rebellions in both Babylon and Egypt, and so the world was, largely, at peace.

But Jerusalem was still in ruins. There was no Israelite king, just governors appointed by the Persians to act in their interests, the first one being Zerubbabel as we saw in Haggai. The rebellions in Babylon and Egypt may have even gotten hopes up in Jerusalem that Israel might again take its place as the seat of God's rule over the nations, but Darius had crushed those rebellions and any such hopes had been thoroughly dashed.

Again, as we saw in the Book of Haggai, the people were discouraged by the magnitude of rebuilding their destroyed city and the temple and to restore some function to the remnants of their country.

These events seemed to have called into question the reliability of the Lord's promises. Knowing the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, one might have thought that the return from exile would be followed by times of tremendous blessing. But that had not been the case. As a result they had made little progress since returning from Babylon. Into this state of things came the words to the prophet, Zechariah, to provide both an understanding of their present circumstances and hope for the future.

"The LORD was very angry with your fathers..." This is the reason why they were taken off into exile and their city, with its temple, was destroyed. They had broken the covenant they made with God and so God brought upon them the covenant curses just as He said he would if they rejected God.

"Therefore say to them..." Again, the prophets didn't choose their own message. They were told what to say and their duty was to deliver the Lord's word, no matter how it was going to be received among the people. Obviously, the lesson of Israel's immediate past had not been learned, for this generation too must repent.

"Lord of hosts," is a shot across the bow of any depressed Israelite. Their God is the God of Gods and the King of Kings, he rules over the entire world; that's the sense of that name, the Lord of hosts.

When we move to vs. 4, Zechariah's first order of business was to remind the people of why they were in the mess they were in. He had warned his people of the consequences should they refuse to repent and continue their rebellion against him, and they had suffered precisely those consequences, the destruction of their land and its cities and exile to Babylon. They had refused to live as His people and, as a result, He had rejected those generations of his people.

"Don't be like your fathers" difference between this and the command of God to teach the law of God to each generation. How else would they learn to love God and follow him. The same is true for us. We, as parents, have the responsibility to teach our children who God is and model for them what it means to follow him. That's what God is calling them back to here. Don't be like your ancestors who didn't do these things. Start now. Return to me. And lead your families to do the same.

Vs. 4 also indicates that Zechariah's generation also needed to repent of their evil ways and practices. It does not appear that they were still bowing down to idols made of wood and stone. But theirs was a more subtle forms of idolatry, including what we know from Haggai, for example, caring more for their personal peace and affluence than for the kingdom and the worship of God. As Haggai famously asked them: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"

In vs. 5, we find a couple of rhetorical questions as a reminder that rejecting God gets us nowhere.

And in vs. 6, we see the generation that went into exile, did eventually repent, but only after suffering the consequences of their rebellion. Zechariah is urging his contemporaries to repent now so that the same would not happen to them. The people may admit that they had been punished for their sins against the Lord and his covenant, but their behavior doesn't yet suggest that they are motivated by true repentance. Otherwise the work on the temple would be far advanced and actually it had hardly begun.

Zechariah's obvious message in this introductory sermon is: learn the lesson of your history and don't repeat it!

We may wonder, in a book that is supposed to bring us hope, why begin on such a somber note? "The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Terrible things happened because they had refused to repent and return to the Lord. Don't you make the same mistake."

Dismal and gloomy or not, this message is found everywhere in the Bible because it is so fundamental and so often necessary. The fact that it is unwelcome to the human heart makes its repetition even more necessary. It has to be hammered home before people will believe it. Everything depends upon the reality of our sin and God's judgment. God's grace is the rescue, yes, but unless we understand and appreciate our need to be rescued, God's grace will never matter to us.

Terrible as the destruction of Jerusalem had been and as heart-rending as the exile had been it fulfilled its purpose. It had made God's people realize that they could not remain in covenant with Yahweh if they rejected Him and His commandments.

There is great grace here, to be sure. The people are back in the Promised Land. Most conquered peoples carried off into exile never returned to their homelands. But Israel has returned and even has the permission of the ruling Persian Empire to begin rebuilding their city and its temple. But still the spiritual issue looms over everything: "Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you." It does not appear that things are yet as they need to be.

The Hebrew term translated "return" means "to turn" or "to repent," just as we have it in vs. 3 and 4.

What does it mean to repent? First, repentance is an act of faith. Obviously, it is by faith that one knows that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. It is by faith that one knows that sin is an offense against God and needs to be repented of. And it is by faith that one knows that there is forgiveness with God that he may be feared. No one repents who does not think his repentance will do any good.

The marvel is that God invites sinners, just as they are, to find life by trusting in Jesus Christ. Repentance is a first act of that new life of faith and only a believing sinner can perform it.

Second, repentance is personal. It always has to do with our relationship with God. This is a characteristic emphasis in the Bible's teaching about repentance. Here we have it in a very typical form in v. 3: "Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you." He might have said, as the Bible sometimes does, indeed, as Zechariah effectively does in v. 4: "Return from your evil ways to godly ways." True repentance does that, of course. But before that, repentance is personal. Again and again in the Bible we encounter this emphasis on the relational nature of repentance.

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord; say to him, 'Take away all iniquity...'" [Hosea 14:1]

When we disobey the commandments of God, we are offending him, showing him disrespect, rebelling against him. And so it is that in true repentance we will acknowledge

our sin to him, grieve before him, ask him for forgiveness and for grace to live better, and seek to obey for his sake. Repentance is about you and your relationship with the Lord.

Finally, repentance is a change of behavior. It is more than that of course, as we have said. But the behavior must change or it is not true repentance. That is the point of v. 4. We must change our evil ways and our evil deeds. We must forsake them and turn to follow after God. Even if not perfectly in this life, there must be a constant turning away from behavior the Lord has forbidden to behavior that he approves.

I do not say that repentance must be perfect to be true. Nothing we do is perfect in this life, certainly not our faith or our repentance, and yet the whole Bible bears witness to the fact that imperfect faith and imperfect repentance can still be real faith and real repentance. But that reality must be demonstrated in behavior, a constant turning away from doing what is wrong to doing what is right, again and again, and more and more consistently.

And, of course, as here in Zechariah 1:1-6, so throughout the Bible, the emphasis falls not only on our personal and individual repentance and its behavior, but on the turning to obedience on the part of the whole church. The pronouns are plural in these verses. We tend to think in highly individualistic terms while the Bible, while never neglecting the individual and his or her own heart and life, his or her own private relationship with the Lord, always emphasizes the life of the believing community together. It is what we are together that is most important for the world.

Zechariah begins the work of encouraging God's people by telling us that the place to begin is to acknowledge that what is happening around us is precisely what we should think would happen in a sinful world in rebellion against God. What we see when we look around us is the confirmation of the truth of God's Word.

And so he says, repent. Put your life right before the Lord and then all of you do that together. Practice the sort of faithfulness that repentance produces, the sort of faithfulness that God loves to bless and to use. Repentance before God is one of the most powerful things in the world because God uses it as a reflection of who He is and that he can do the same for anyone who comes to Him in true repentance. Let's pray.