



**Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 19, 2007
Released on Wednesday, August 15, 2007**

“Zechariah Called for a Return to God”

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 12.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 1:1–6; 7:8–14; 8:16–23.

PRINTED TEXT: Zechariah 1:1–6; 7:8–14.

TIME: 520 B.C.; 518 B.C.

PLACE: Palestine

Zechariah 1:1–6

1 In the eighth month, 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,
2 The Lord hath been sore displeased with your fathers.
3 Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of hosts.
4 Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Turn ye now from your evil ways, and from your evildoings: but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, saith the Lord.
5 Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?
6 But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers? and they returned and said, Like as the Lord of hosts thought to do unto us, according to our ways, and according to our doings, so hath he dealt with us.

Zechariah 7:8–14

8 And the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah, saying,
9 Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother:
10 And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.
11 But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear.
12 Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his Spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts.
13 Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts:
14 But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. To see how Zechariah called God's people to live for Him.
2. Name at least one attitude and one behavior that hinder people from having God's favor today.
3. Identify and eliminate one attitude or one behavior that hinders his or her fellowship with God.

LESSON OUTLINE:

LORD'S CALL TO REPENTANCE (Zech. 1:1–6)

A REFUSAL TO RESPOND (Zech. 7:8–14)

INTRODUCTION

God is so faithful to His promises; even those promises that His children do not immediately agree with or appreciate—like discipline.

Not soon after each of us was born and began to be taught by our parents—or by whoever raised us—right from wrong, we quickly discovered that we would get a certain reaction to every one of our actions; “consequences” is what we later learned this phenomenon was. As a toddler, I learned with a quickness that if I touch my mother's delicate knick-knacks on the coffee table in our living room, I would elicit an “Uh-uh-uh; no-no-no!” from her. Eventually, I learned to look and not touch.

More graphic than this, I also learned the hard way that if I continued to sneak chocolate bars (Baby Ruth's, to be specific) from atop my brother's bedroom dresser drawer—eating my share until satisfied; I could count on becoming sick and regurgitating the evidence all over the kitchen floor! *Yuck!* The lesson learned in that instance was being disobedient could lead to physical ailments.

Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion says that “for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” I would like to fine-tune this law as it relates to today's lesson, and say that *for every one of our actions or behaviors, God has a supremely just reaction.*

God gets no pleasure in chastising us. However, because of His incomprehensible and unconditional love for us, He must correct us through His divine repercussions of our actions. Proverbs 13:24 explicitly tells us that, “He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly.”

More directly than this is Proverbs 3:11–12 which says, “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor detest His correction; For whom the lord loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.” Considering this, we should be *most* grateful when God chastises us because it indicates that He loves us. Times of discipline from the Lord seem hard and painful, and we often wonder whether they will ever end. The sooner we learn the lessons from God, the sooner we can be restored.

For the past weeks we have been studying messages from prophets who warned the people of Israel that if they did not renounce their sinful ways, God was going to punish them with captivity. The text last week was from one of the prophets who went into captivity and ministered to the people while in the land of Babylon. The

lesson this week is unique in that it is from one of the prophets who ministered to the people after they returned to Jerusalem. Israel now had the enormous task of putting their lives back together. One of the first things on their agenda was to rebuild the temple and put God back in the center of their lives.

After the seventy years prophesied by Jeremiah, there were three returns. They took place under the leadership of Zerubbabel (in 537 B.C.), Ezra (in 548 B.C.), and Nehemiah (in 445 B.C.). Records of these returns are found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra describes the rebuilding of the temple, while Nehemiah describes the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. God raised up the prophet Zechariah to encourage the people when the work on the temple slowed down.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Zechariah was a postexilic prophet. This means he prophesied after the Babylonian exile had occurred and after God's people had been allowed to return home as a result of the decree of King Cyrus of Persia (2 Chronicles 36:22, 23). That journey home took place in the year 538 B.C.

Those who returned to Judah were initially excited to be home—back in the land that God had promised would be the place where Abraham's descendants would live. One of the first orders of business was to rebuild the temple. This was an essential part of Cyrus's decree: "The Lord God ... hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2).

The work proceeded smoothly at first. Within two years of their arrival, the people had completed the foundation of the new structure. The Bible records the mixed emotions that were expressed at the dedication of the foundation. Many shouted with joy at this significant step; however, those who could remember the grandeur of Solomon's temple and who recognized that this new temple would in no way measure up to it began to weep (Ezra 3:12, 13).

Perhaps the disparity in response to the rebuilding began to dampen enthusiasm to complete the project. Ezra 4:1–5 notes the rise of opposition from without; because of this, "Then ceased the work of the house of God.... So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:24). That was 520 B.C. Thus from approximately 536 to 520 B.C. (16 years), the temple of the Lord lay unfinished—a sad witness to a discouraged people.

QUESTIONS

I. LORD'S CALL TO REPENTANCE (Zechariah 1:1–6)

1. By whom did Zechariah date his prophecy, and what is significant about that (Zechariah 1:1)?

Zechariah, like Haggai (Haggai 1:1) dated his prophecy according to the reign of Darius, the Persian king. [Note that Persia is modern day Iran.] These are the only two prophets to date their works by anyone other than a king of Israel of Judah. This probably gives added significance to the fact that "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) were now in place. This era began with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar

and his conquest of Jerusalem and will continue until the Lord Himself reigns in the city. The name "Zechariah" means "Yahweh remembers." Judah needed to know that.

2. What did God say regarding the previous generations of Israel (vs. 2-5)?

"The Lord hath been sore displeased with your fathers." (Zech. 1:2) is what God told Zechariah to tell the people of Judah. They needed to be careful not to ignore the lessons from the history of their ancestors—or *previous generations of Israel*, and they needed to be certain that they did not repeat the disobedience that had caused God's anger. We today can learn from their mistakes as well, and eliminate the need for God's discipline.

Earlier prophets had repeatedly warned Judah's ancestors about the importance of obeying God. They too had been told to turn from evil ways and accompanying evil actions. However, they did not pay attention to God. Zechariah's message to the present generation was "Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried" (Zech. 1:4). It was important for them to observe history and avoid the same destruction as their ancestors. God graciously offers the opportunity to repent to every generation. Are we listening today?

3. Is there a danger today of Christians returning to "the land of God" physically without really returning to God spiritually? If so, how do we avoid this danger?

Some hold the perception that the church building is the place of God. After a time away from involvement in church, people may feel a need to return to church to fulfill some type of religious ritual and feel better about themselves. Sometimes we find it easier to perform outward acts that appear to evidence faith when our hearts actually are shallow toward God? See Matthew 15:8.

There is no physical, earthly "promised land" for the church of the New Testament as there was for Israel of the Old Testament. This fact should make it easier for us to avoid Israel's mistake of equating any kind of physical return with a spiritual return.

4. How did God stress the divine origin of this message (v. 6)?

What God had said through the prophets had come to pass exactly as He said and still stood as a warning to the new generation. God said, "My words and my statutes, ... did they not take hold of your fathers?" (Zech. 1:6). The word translated "take hold of" means "to reach." They had ignored God's warnings and thought they were getting away with it, but the time came when His Word caught up with them and the prophesied punishment came.

They had to admit that what God had said had come to pass. He had dealt with them exactly as He had said He would. This is a powerful reminder to us that the Word of God will be fulfilled completely. He has given clear instruction about the importance of receiving His Son as personal Saviour and then living for Him from then on. Do we dare think He does not really mean that? Will He renege someday and allow people into heaven even though they have rejected His offer of salvation? It is not wise to think so.

5. The heart is considered the seat of the emotions. What steps have you taken to develop a proper heart for God and His kingdom? What steps do you yet need to take?

A good starting point is to examine how Bible characters developed a heart for God. David, as he cried for mercy from God because of his sin, said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). The first step is humility.

Forsaking the lure of this world is also necessary in developing a heart for God. Paul says, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed" (Romans 12:2). Keeping God's Word leads to a renewed heart. Jesus said, "But that [seed] on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). These biblical examples and precepts should shape our individual practices.

II. A REFUSAL TO RESPOND (Zechariah 7:8–14)

6. What kind of conduct did the Lord want from His people (Zechariah 7:8)?

God communicated that He was far more concerned about inner spiritual reality than He was about formal religious activity. Fasting was part of their religious activity, but He wanted external actions that exhibited a heart that was right with Him. First He mentioned true judgment, mercy, and compassion toward others. The word "judgment" refers to justice. It can be demonstrated by Isaiah's words: "Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). People deserve justice.

A little later Zechariah said, "These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: and let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord" (Zech. 8:16–17).

7. How did God describe the ways in which His people in earlier generations had refused to respond to His commands (vs. 11,12)?

God had sent the same message to the previous generations through earlier prophets. His desires for godly living had not changed. The adamant refusal of the earlier generations to obey is described graphically as their turning a deaf ear to what they heard, shrugging their shoulders with an uncaring gratitude, and holding their hands over their ears so that they would not be able to hear what the prophets were saying. What a rebellious response!

God's words had come from His Spirit ministering through the prophets (v. 12). God simply could not stand by and let them get away with that, and so the judgments He had warned about came to pass. Zechariah described His response as "a great wrath." It was a rage coming from God against those who dared presume He could be ignored at will. What ignorance to think God could be defied! Are we listening?

8. What modern applications can we see in Zechariah 7:12?

We remind ourselves that people have free will—they can choose to close their ears and refuse to hear. Instead of their rejection causing us to be reluctant to share the

message in the future, God expects us to continue to do our part by faithfully proclaiming His message. Jesus did! Even though Scripture reveals that the majority of people will reject the message (Matthew 7:13, 14). This fact should not dissuade us from being teachers of God's Word, sharing the message of eternal hope.

9. What did God say would happen to His people if they continued to refuse to listen to Him (vs. 13, 14)?

The message in Zechariah 7:13–14 is pertinent to every person. God said again that when He cried out to His people and sought to draw them back to Himself, they ignored Him. Just so, when they cried out to Him in distress, He would refuse to hear and deliver them. After repeated warnings over a long period of time, their destruction came. Then they cried to God, begging for deliverance; but because they had refused to listen to Him for so long, He had determined that the time for punishment had come.

10. How does Proverbs say what we should learn from this?

In Proverbs 1:20–23, wisdom is personified as a woman calling to people to listen to her words of instruction. She promised that if they respond, she will help them understand. But there are serious consequences when wisdom is ignored.

Look at what Proverbs 1:24–26 and 28–30 have to say about Israel's rejection of His admonishments.

24 But since you rejected me when I called
and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand,
25 since you ignored all my advice
and would not accept my rebuke,
26 I in turn will laugh at your disaster;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you-
28 "Then they will call to me but I will not answer;
they will look for me but will not find me.
29 Since they hated knowledge
and did not choose to fear the LORD,
30 since they would not accept my advice
and spurned my rebuke,

Israel reached the point that God would no longer respond to them. Therefore He scattered them among the nations as if by a "whirlwind," and their land was left desolate. God did not allow anyone else to settle in their land, however, because His plan was to eventually bring them back home. The land, therefore, remained desolate for the many years of the Babylonian Captivity.

Even after having been made angry and having to discipline the house of Judah, God still made provisions for them to receive a blessing upon their repentance. *God is so good!* He likewise wants to bless us in our generation, but, can only do so when we are obedient to Him and His Word. Do you want a blessing or a *spanking*? The choice is yours.

CONCLUSION As If We Had Never Left

America's civil war ended in 1865. President Abraham Lincoln faced a particularly explosive issue: what was to be done with the southern states that had seceded from

the Union to form the Confederacy? Some demanded a stiff punishment for what they considered treason against the United States. Lincoln, however, advocated a much more conciliatory policy. His eloquent response to the matter of how to treat the states in question was that it would be "as if they had never left."

Today's lesson has called attention to God's gracious invitation to forsake sinful ways and return to Him. He has done all He can do to remove whatever obstacles exist. The most daunting obstacle, sin, has been addressed at the cross through God's provision of His Son, Jesus, as an atoning sacrifice. If we choose to accept that sacrifice and respond to the Father's invitation to come home, He will forgive us completely and make us new creatures. It will indeed be as if we had never left.

PRACTICAL POINTS

The only way we can truly turn from sin is to turn to the Lord (Zech. 1:1–3).

We should beware of bad examples, for they are so easy to follow (vs. 4).

Willful disobedience to God always leads to disaster (vs. 5–6)

We cannot be rightly related to the Lord if we lack compassion for people (7:8–10).

Only the Holy Spirit can break through to a heart that refuses to listen to God (vs. 11–12).

If we constantly refuse to listen to God, we cannot constantly expect Him to listen to our prayers (vs. 13–14).—*Jarl K. Waggoner*

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God is now—and always has been—ready for you to return.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for the opportunity to leave the life of sin and return to You. We are so unworthy of such an opportunity, yet in Your grace You have opened up a way through Your Son, Jesus. Help us to see that whatever we give up in the process of returning to You will be far, far outweighed by what You have in store for us. In Jesus' name, amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our lesson next week (August 26, 2007), we see that God's just judgment is near. Read Malachi 2:17–3:5; 4:1 in preparation for the lesson entitled, "Malachi Described God's Just Judgment." The Golden Text is Malachi 3:1–2. *Good studying!*

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

Kimbley Y. Baker-Richardson
Jesus Is All Ministries
www.jesusisall.com