

# LESSON 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Why study Zechariah?**

This question should really be phrased as “What are some *other* reasons for studying Zechariah” because, of course, the primary reason to study Zechariah is that it is part of the inspired word of God.

One other reason is that it is a fascinating book. It has some obscure visions that take careful study to unravel. It is deeply rooted in the history of the time and yet parts of the book point forward to events that would occur many years later. It has some of the most beautiful Messianic prophecies found anywhere in the Old Testament. Here is how various commentators have described the book:

Few books of the Old Testament are as difficult of interpretation as the book of Zechariah; no other book is as Messianic ... The scope of Zechariah’s vision and the profundity of his thought are almost without parallel.

Zechariah is the longest book of the Minor Prophets, and in many ways it is the most obscure. We are confronted with visions, and angels, with apocalyptic observations and a very strong reference to the Messiah, who is also introduced as the Branch, or Sprout of David.

Sadly, Zechariah is often a neglected book. I can't recall ever having had a Bible class on Zechariah apart from surveys of the Minor Prophets. And yet few books of prophecy are more Messianic or more often quoted in the New Testament than Zechariah. Zechariah is not a book to be neglected!

### **Who was Zechariah?**

There are about forty Zechariah's in the Bible. Who was this one?

The first verse tells us that he was "the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo" (meaning that Iddo was his grandfather). But that verse raises an immediate question. Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 call him simply the son of Iddo. Why?

Perhaps Berechiah died young, leaving Zechariah to be raised by his grandfather. Another possibility is that Iddo may have been a much more prominent figure than Berechiah. In Nehemiah 12:4, a priest named Iddo is named among those who returned from Babylon as part of the first return in 538 BC. Nehemiah 12:16 tells us that this Iddo had a son named Zechariah. We can't say with certainty, but most commentators think Nehemiah 12:16 is referring to Zechariah the prophet.

If Nehemiah 12 is describing Zechariah the prophet, then we know that his grandfather was part of the initial return in 538 BC, which is why we think Zechariah was a young man when he had the visions recorded in this book. Zechariah was, almost certainly, born in Babylon. This is in contrast to his contemporary, Haggai, who was an old man having seen the original temple with his own eyes.

We will soon see that Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, which means that only about 18 years had elapsed since the time his grandfather came to Jerusalem from Babylon.

He was likely in his twenties when the temple was completed in 515 BC, and in his sixties when Queen Esther came to power far away in Persia and when Xerxes I was defeated by the Greeks. He would have seen the Greeks rising on the horizon

as a new enemy of God's people, and we will see a mention of that threat in Chapter 9.

### **How did Zechariah die?**

There is no need to turn to the end of the book for that question because Zechariah's death is not recorded in his book. But we may see the answer to that question elsewhere in the Bible.

There are two particularly puzzling references to Zechariah in the New Testament, and the first concerns the death of someone named Zechariah.

**Matthew 23:35** — *That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.*

Is that verse describing the same Zechariah who wrote the book of Zechariah? It certainly seems so based on the name of his father, Berekiah, which is the same name we find in verse 1 of Zechariah. But most commentators believe that Jesus was speaking of another Zechariah.

**2 Chronicles 24:20-22** — *And the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath also forsaken you. And they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord. Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to*

*him, but slew his son. And when he died, he said, The Lord look upon it, and require it.*

That Zechariah certainly seems to have died in the manner described in Matthew 23, but the name of his father (Jehoiada) does not match the father's name in Matthew 23 (Berekiah). How do we explain the difference?

One possibility is that Jesus is in fact describing the death of the prophet Zechariah, and both Zechariah's just happened to meet similar fates, but there is no other indication anywhere that Zechariah the prophet died that way.

Another possibility is that the name Berekiah was added at some point by an overzealous scribe. This is not my favorite explanation, but it did happen on rare occasion. (And before we act as if the issue of some scribe adding an explanatory phrase to the text is just an ancient problem, we should keep in mind that some modern versions of the Bible — such as the NIV especially — do the same thing all throughout the text of the Bible!) This view is supported by the parallel passage in Luke 11, which makes no mention of Berekiah.

**Luke 11:51** — *From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.*

The short answer is that we don't know for sure. The Zechariah Jesus was speaking about may have even been a contemporary of those who were hearing Jesus at that time.

I mentioned that Matthew 23:35 was one of two puzzling references to Zechariah in the New Testament. What is the other one?

**Matthew 27:9-10** — *Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty*

*pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value; And gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me.*

How is that verse related to Zechariah, and why is it puzzling? The answer to the first question is found in Zechariah 11.

**Zechariah 11:12-13** — *And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the Lord.*

The reason the verse from Matthew 27 is puzzling is that it seems to attribute the quote about the thirty pieces of silver to Jeremiah instead of Zechariah. How do we explain that?

One possible explanation is to note that Matthew 27 mentions the field as well as the 30 pieces of silver. Zechariah 11:12-13 does not mention the field at all. So perhaps Matthew 27 alluded to Jeremiah with regard to the field, probably to Jeremiah 19:11.

The mention of only one source when the allusion is to two sources would not be unique to Matthew. Mark does this also. Mark 1:2-3 refers first to Malachi, then to Isaiah, but Mark ascribes both prophecies to "Isaiah," the major prophet. Jeremiah likewise may have just been given precedence over Zechariah in Matthew 27.

Another possibility has to do with how scrolls were often referenced. The rabbis often referred to a collection of books by the name of the first book in the collection. In the Jewish Tanakh, the prophetic books were in a different order than in our Bible, even though they are all there. The first listed book in the collection of

the Prophets was Jeremiah, not Isaiah. Thus, a citation of Jeremiah could cover an actual quotation from Zechariah.

Another possibility is that Jeremiah and Zechariah both made this same prophecy, but only Zechariah wrote it down. Jesus in Matthew 27 would then be telling us that Jeremiah spoke this same prophecy. This explanation is my favorite. It is similar to Jude's citation to what Enoch said in Jude 14 (which was later written down in the non-canonical book of Enoch). Note that Matthew 27 does not say that the prophecy was *written* by Jeremiah, but rather that it was *spoken* by Jeremiah.

### **What is the historical setting of the book?**

Where are we and how did we get here? You should always ask those questions when you begin to study a book in the Old Testament. Sometimes the answers to those questions are immediate — Genesis 1:1 comes to mind — but for other books we need to do a little digging.

First, we should pause and ask ourselves why this matters. The answer to that question is found in the opening words of the very first verse of Zechariah — “In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius.” The book itself is telling us that we need to understand the history in which the book was written.

If, as some suggest, Zechariah is pointing only to future events far removed from his initial readers, why does it matter when the book was written? Why does the book begin as it does? The answer is that it does matter, and Zechariah 1:1 tells us that it matters.

We have seen this history before. We reviewed it when we studied Daniel, and we reviewed it again when we studied Ezra and Esther.

With our study of Zechariah, we should start in 586 BC with the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. (See the timeline on the class handout available at [www.ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://www.ThyWordIsTruth.com).)

What sort of impact did that event have on the Jewish people? In a word, dramatic. We cannot underestimate the impact it had. Things had gone seriously wrong, and the problems were far from fixed. We see the impact of Jerusalem's fall from the very first verse of Zechariah. Look at the first verse of Zechariah again and compare it, for example, to the first verse of Isaiah.

**Isaiah 1:1** — *The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

**Zechariah 1:1** — *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.*

Did you notice the difference? Isaiah gave his time frame using the reigns of the kings of *Judah*. Zechariah gave his time frame using the reign of a king of *Persia*.

By the time of Zechariah, there were no more kings of Judah — but that would not be the case forever. And Zechariah will tell the people about the great king who was to come and sit on the throne of David. By the time of Zechariah, God's city was in ruins — but Zechariah will tell them that that would also not be the case forever.

In 587 BC, prompted by King Zedekiah's disloyalty, Nebuchadnezzar brought his army against the tiny kingdom of Judah on the edge of the Babylonian Empire. Many Jews were killed, many fled to surrounding nations, many were exiled to Babylon, and others remained in the land.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled until 562 BC and then was followed by a series of unsuccessful rulers from 562–556, including his son Amel-Marduk, his son-in-law Neriglissar, and finally Neriglissar's son Labashi-Marduk.

Nabonidus, a powerful general in the Babylonian army, was finally able to stabilize the empire in 556 BC. He ruled for awhile along side his son, Belshazzar. The last day of Belshazzar is described in Daniel 5.

In 539 BC, Cyrus crossed the Zagros mountains, forded the Tigris, and marched with little resistance into Babylonian territory before taking the city of Babylon. Cyrus gave permission for the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland, which we see in the opening chapters of the book of Ezra.

Cyrus' reign was cut short by his death in 530 BC in a battle on the eastern frontier of his empire. His son Cambyses ascended the throne and by 525 BC had succeeded in incorporating Egypt into the Persian Empire.

While he was at this western frontier of his empire, Cambyses' rule was challenged at home in 522 BC when an imposter (often called Pseudo-Smerdis) rebelled, claiming to be Cambyses' brother Smerdis. (Cambyses had eliminated his actual brother prior to his Egyptian campaign, so he knew this person was an imposter!)

The core of the empire supported the rebellion because the new ruler had promised tax relief. Cambyses, leading the main flank of the Persian army, began the journey back to Mesopotamia to quell the rebellion, but he died of an accidental self-inflicted wound along the way.

Darius, one of his generals, replaced Cambyses in 522 BC, claiming blood relation to the royal family and gaining the support of the army. Darius succeeded in eliminating Pseudo-Smerdis in September of 522 BC.

The death of Pseudo-Smerdis prompted rebellions across the empire, which Darius had to put down. In one case, Darius impaled the leader of the rebellion along with 2500 of his supporters in the city of Babylon.

Egypt revolted in 519 BC, leading to Darius' Egyptian expedition in 519 and 518 BC, during which he succeeded in reconquering Egypt for Persia.

Why is this important? Zechariah's visions in 520 BC are dated between the Babylonian revolts in 522–521 and the Egyptian revolt in 519, which explains Darius' concern for his western frontier in the preceding years and will also help us explain some of the visions we will soon study.

During Darius' rule, the Jews continued to return to their homeland. The restoration of the temple was renewed, leading to a foundation-laying ceremony in 520 BC and a dedication in 515 BC.

While Darius successfully put down the Egyptian rebellion in 519–518 BC, it would be his western frontier that would eventually spell his demise. Darius' desire to extend his dominion over Europe met with strong resistance from the Greeks, who defeated him in the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. This defeat emboldened the Egyptians, who rose in rebellion in 486 BC. In the midst of these setbacks, Darius died, passing the scepter to his son Xerxes (the husband of Queen Esther). Alexander the Great conquered Persia about 150 years later.

### **Why was the book of Zechariah written?**

The easiest and surest way to misinterpret a book of the Bible is to not ask this question. Why was the book written?

The historical overview we just discussed provides one very important reason why the book of Zechariah was written. With all that was then going on in the world — wars between great powers, political instability in Persia, the rise and fall of kings — where was God's attention focused? On his people — a small, seemingly powerless group of outcasts on the edge of the empire trying to rebuild their fallen city and temple.

Who at that time would have thought that group had any significance? Who at that time would have thought that it was that group who would eventually usher in a kingdom that would sweep aside all of the kingdoms of this earth?

Did even that group of outcasts see that themselves? Did they see themselves as God saw them? Did they understand their importance in the plan of God?

A major goal of Zechariah is to open their eyes to those things and to the great king who was coming from among their own people. A great king was coming who would bless the entire world and establish an unshakable, immovable, eternal kingdom for the people of God.

And perhaps we too need our eyes opened. Do we see ourselves as God sees us? Do we understand our own importance and our own significance? If not, Zechariah can open our eyes as well.

For another answer to the question of why the book was written, we should consider what Jerusalem was like at this time. Jerusalem at this time was a picture of utter gloom. The walls of the city were a mere pile of rubble. The once magnificent temple of Solomon was devastated beyond recognition. The former exiles were surrounded by angry opponents who threatened them with warlike derision at every move they made.

What did the people of Zechariah's day need to hear? They needed encouragement. They needed to know that God had not forgotten them and would never forget his faithful people. They needed a glimpse of what was coming for the people of God. They needed to see Jesus, and Zechariah (more than any other prophet save Isaiah) lifts the curtain to show the people their coming Messiah.

They were rebuilding the temple. They must have known that this new temple could be destroyed just as the prior temple had been destroyed. They must have thought, why bother? Zechariah answers that question. They needed to see the one who was greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6). They needed to see the one whose body was the true temple (John 2:21).

If our interpretation of Zechariah would not have provided such answers and such encouragement to its initial readers, then our interpretation is wrong. We will have turned left when we should have turned right. If our view of this book is that it speaks entirely about an age separated 2500 years (and counting) from its initial readers, then our view is wrong.

Zechariah was written for us, but it was not written only for us. In fact, it was not even written primarily for us. Its primary audience was its original audience. And if we want to understand Zechariah's message for us, we first must understand its message for them.

Yes, Zechariah speaks to us, and yes Zechariah is a book of prophecy, but Zechariah is firmly anchored in history. And how do we know that? The very first tells us: "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius." If we can understand Zechariah apart from the history in which it was written, then why did the Holy Spirit begin the book by anchoring it firmly in history?

And, although anchored in history, Zechariah does have a vital message for us as well. We, too, can become discouraged, and when we do, we need to do what Zechariah told the ancients to do — we need to lift up our eyes to Jesus. And *our* view of Jesus is infinitely more clear than their view. They were looking at Jesus from afar as a prophetic curtain was briefly lifted — we by contrast see Jesus with great clarity in the full revelation of the New Testament. We, like them, need to see where we fit in the plan of God. We, like them, need to look beyond the gloom and the confusion of this world and keep our eyes focused on Christ.

**Hebrews 12:1-2** — *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who*

*for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

I'm not sure if there is a better summary of Zechariah than that!

### **Why is the book of Zechariah thought to be so difficult?**

Although the book of Zechariah does contain some straightforward historical narrative, it also contains some visions that are definitely not straightforward.

The first eight chapters, in particular, have caused some commentators to throw up their hands in frustration. One commentary I have is called *The Evasive Text: Zechariah 1-8 and the Frustrated Readers*. In the preface, the author of the commentary (if we can call it that!) confesses that he doesn't understand Zechariah! He writes: "It is finally concluded that Zechariah lacks a concrete symbolic logic, defies grammatical conventions, and is unreadable as it stands — and always was this way." That statement is, of course, completely wrong, but it does show the problems some have had with this book.

The visions and the oracles in Zechariah have given the book its reputation, but Zechariah is certainly no more difficult than Daniel (a book we have already studied) or Revelation (a book we will study after Zechariah and that, I believe, we will discover is not as difficult as its reputation might suggest).

These visions in Zechariah are described using apocalyptic language — what is that? Revelation is called *Apokalupsis* in Greek, and it is from that word that we get the word apocalyptic, which means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed.

Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. In addition to Revelation, such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and even in the gospels and epistles.

Apocalyptic language is almost always used to denote conflict and victory. It is used when God judges and smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. It is used to describe times of crisis and judgment.

### **Why Does God Use Apocalyptic Language?**

Some think it was used in Revelation to shield the church from Roman retaliation. But that explanation has never appealed much to me. If we can understand the book 2000 years after it was written, then surely Rome could understand the symbols at the time it was written.

I think the reason apocalyptic language was used is that God wanted to use it! Apocalyptic language has been called an oil painting from God. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly, but sometimes uses dark language, and perhaps such language is reserved for times of conflict and judgment.

How can we understand apocalyptic language? We need to proceed carefully and keep a few interpretative ground rules in mind.

**Rule 1:** We should use easily understood verses to help us understand verses that are harder to understand.

This rule always applies in Bible study. If we find some doctrinal position (such as a thousand year of reign of Christ on earth) in apocalyptic language, and if that doctrinal position is found nowhere else in the Bible and in fact contradicts very easy to understand statements found elsewhere in the Bible, then we can be certain that that doctrinal position is wrong and that those who hold it have misunderstood the apocalyptic language.