

The Saga of Two Conquerers, Part 1

Scripture: Zechariah 9:1–8

Code: 2164

INTRODUCTION

As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world, is going to return to earth to establish the Kingdom promised to Israel and all those who have trusted in Him. We anticipate the reversing of the Adamic curse and the recreating of the earth to become as He originally intended it. Jesus Christ will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Many of the details of that coming Kingdom and of Christ's return are given in Scripture. In fact, a major element of Old Testament prophecy is of the coming Kingdom. The prophets frequently foretold the ending of history, the judgment of the nations, and the reign of Messiah, thus fulfilling promises made to David (2 Sam. 7:12) and to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). The Messiah will come not only to conquer the nations who oppose God, but also to redeem Israel and establish the Kingdom into which all believing saints of all the ages will be ushered. Similarly the New Testament is full of statements like the coming of "the Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5) and "It is the last time" (1 John 2:18).

A. The Signs of the Times

Christians have always believed they were living in the time of Christ's return. However things happening today make it reasonable to believe that His return is close. For example, Ezekiel 39 speaks of the great battle of Armageddon, which will occur at the end of the Tribulation right before the Lord returns to establish His Kingdom. All the nations of the world will be at war yet Christ will defeat them all. Warfare of that magnitude was hard to conceive of until the twentieth century. Ezekiel 39:1-10 says, "Prophesy against Gog, and say, Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I am against thee, O Gog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and I will turn thee back, and leave but the sixth part of thee" (vv. 1-2). That may well be a reference to a Soviet army descending from the north upon Israel. God will almost totally destroy it. Verses 4-5 say, "Thou shalt fall upon the mountains of Israel, thou, and all thy hordes, and the peoples that are with thee; I will give thee unto the ravenous birds of every sort, and to the beasts of the field to be devoured. Thou shalt fall upon the open field; for I have spoken it, saith the Lord God."

Ravenous birds will devour the carcasses of the northern army. In Revelation 19:18-19, a comparative passage in the New Testament, God calls the ravenous birds to come and feed on "the flesh of the kings. and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men" who will have been slain in that great battle.

B. The Setting of the Scene

Zechariah 9-14 foretells the downfall of the nations, the salvation of Israel, and the establishment of the Messiah as King. Chapters 9-14 are divided into two parts: 9-11 deal with the destruction of the nations and the rise of Israel. 12-14 emphasize the spiritual restoration of Israel. And though we see salvation of Israel in the first section also, its main emphasis is on the political scene.

Zechariah was the grandson of Iddo, who had returned to Jerusalem with 43,000 of the children of Israel in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel following the seventy-year captivity of Israel in Babylon (Ezra 2:64; Neh. 12:4, 6; Zech. 1:1). The former glory of Israel was only a memory. Although the people had begun to rebuild their cities, the work came to a halt in the process. The surrounding nations posed a threat to the Jews, who were unable to defend themselves against an attack. Therefore God encouraged them to rebuild Jerusalem and trust Him to protect them by sending the prophets Haggai

and Zechariah.

1. The purpose of Zechariah's prophecy

Zechariah begins his prophecy of encouragement to Israel, saying, "The Lord answered the angel that talked with me with good words and comforting words.... Cry yet, 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" (1:13, 17). Zechariah's message was a comforting message, like that of Isaiah, who said, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God" (Isa. 40:1). Although the great and glorious city of Jerusalem was in ruins, God would inspire and enable them to restore it. That was the message of the first eight chapters.

The rest of the book focuses on the future. Rather than the immediate rebuilding of Jerusalem in his own time, Zechariah envisions the great restoration of God's Kingdom in the end times. He takes one giant step from history to the fulfillment of prophecy at the end of the ages. However the two parts of this book are connected with the theme of God's love for Israel and His faithfulness to fulfill His promise to His people--not only to rebuild Israel historically, but to establish His victorious reign in the end times.

2. The pledge of God's promise

God's promise of a temporal restoration of Jerusalem was fulfilled a few decades after Zechariah's time. But that was only a pledge of what God was planning to do in the end. It was simply a way to prove to His people that He meant to keep His promises. The Jewish person could recall how God restored his capital city and be confident that He would keep His Word in the future. Frequently in the Old Testament when God gave a prophecy regarding the distant future, He also gave a short-term prophecy with a closer historical fulfillment. It served as a signpost to the greater fulfillment in the future. Such a pattern instilled confidence that what was prophesied would surely happen in the future. The historical fulfillment was God's tangible token of His promise. For example Daniel prophesied about the Antichrist in the end times, and the closer historical fulfillment was a king by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes (cf., 11:21-35). Antiochus was given in the prophecy as a signpost of the Antichrist.

In the same way chapter 9 distinguishes between two conquerors. The first conqueror (vv. 1-8) was the closer historical fulfillment of the second conqueror, who is yet to come (vv. 9- 17). The first conqueror's name is not given in the text but from the circumstances described, he is obviously Alexander the Great. He was an unrighteous pagan used by God to destroy the nations and preserve Israel. He is a human picture of Christ returning to judge the nations and save Israel at the end of the Tribulation. The implication is that if God can do that through a godless human, imagine what He will do in the end times through the divine conqueror when He comes!

LESSON

I. THE HUMAN CONQUEROR (vv. 1-8)

A. The Purging by God (vv. 1-7)

1. Of Syria (vv. 1-2a)

a) The places of judgment (v. 1a)"The burden of the word of the Lord in the land of Hadrach, and Damascus shall be its rest.""Burden" (Heb., massa), coming from a Hebrew verb meaning "to take or lift up," came to be used of a prophetic message of judgment. It was like a great burden on the back of a prophet. This particular judgment coming from the Word of the Lord was directed to the land of Hadrach, an obscure place that is not easily identified. Some think it was the ancient village of Hatarika near Damascus, which was northeast of the Sea of Galilee and mentioned in the annals of the Assyrian kings. Another explanation is that it refers to the Medo-Persian kingdom. H.C. Leupold in his Exposition of Zechariah notes that the components of Hadrach, had ("sharp") and rakh "soft," may well be a reference to the dual Medo-Persian kingdom in Zechariah's day ([Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971], pp. 164-65). Its leaders were aggressive conquerors, sharp like swords, yet their

debauchery made them soft. So Hadrach may have been a veiled reference to the Medo-Persian empire to protect Israel from inciting the anger of that empire. Verse 1 also refers to Damascus, one of the oldest cities in the world. This ancient capital of Syria was one of Israel's worst enemies from 900 to 721 B.C. Several hundred years later is when Alexander came into the picture. At the battle of Issus in southeast Asia Minor in 333 B.C. Alexander defeated Darius, king of Persia, and began to break the back of the Medo-Persian empire. That defeat opened the door to Syria (north of Palestine), Phoenicia and Philistia (along its coast), and Egypt (south of it) in his campaign to conquer the great powers of the world. The Holy Spirit used Zechariah to reveal Alexander's battle plan centuries before Alexander was born!b) The perspective of judgment (vv. 1b-2a)"When the eyes of man, as of all the tribes of Israel, shall be toward the Lord. And Hamath also shall border by it."Zechariah was saying that God's judgment would be visible to all mankind, especially Israel. Their focus would be "toward the Lord" fixing their fearful gaze on Alexander, who would be the instrument of the Lord. The inhabitants of Israel and the Gentile nations of Syria (including Hamath, a neighboring city of Syria and the site of modern Hama), Phoenicia, Philistia, and Egypt were shaking in their boots. Without knowing it, they were witnessing the Lord coming in judgment through that Greek conqueror. Throughout history God has used ungodly men to carry out His judgment. In the book of Habakkuk God used the Chaldeans as His instruments. Isaiah prophesied about Cyrus, the king of the Medes, whom God used to lead many of the Jews from Babylon to Israel (Isa. 45:1-4). God even used Herod Antipas to bring about the death of Christ (cf., Acts 4:27; Luke 23:11-12), the act that brought about the redemption of mankind. God has often used pagans to bring about His judgment; Alexander the Great was no exception. Before you give Alexander too much credit, realize he was simply doing what God appointed him to do. Verse 4 says, "Behold, the Lord will cast her [the city of Tyre] out." Rather than mentioning Alexander, it states that God will overthrow the city. Bible commentaries identify this passage as referring to Alexander the Great because it so precisely follows the order of his campaign. But he merely foreshadowed the conquest of the nations by the final divine conqueror.

2. Of Tyre (vv. 2b-4)

a) Her pride (vv. 2b-3)"Tyre, and Sidon, though it be very wise. And Tyre did build herself a stronghold, and heaped up silver like the dust, and fine gold like the mire of the streets."The end of verse 2 mentions that judgment will also fall upon Tyre and Sidon, whose only significance was its proximity to Tyre, the prominent city of Phoenicia. The nation had made great maritime and mercantile accomplishments and was therefore very proud. Their worldly wisdom led them to believe that they were invincible. A couple centuries before Alexander arrived on the scene, Tyre had been conquered by the Babylonians. As a result, they moved their city from the mainland to an island a half mile off shore. Although a small island, it was a seemingly impenetrable fortress. "Tyre [Heb., tsor, "rock"] did build herself a stronghold [Heb., matsor, "citadel"]" is a play on words in the Hebrew text, using similar sounding words. The new Tyre was built on a fortified rock, having a 150-foot wall around the entire island. Coupled with its offshore location and the unsurpassed Phoenician navy to defend it, the people of Tyre felt they were invincible.b) Her prince (Ezek. 28)Ezekiel 28 tells us what a vile city Tyre was, as the prophet pronounces judgment upon its king: "The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying, Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyre, Thus saith the Lord God: Because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a god, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas, yet thou art a man, and not God, though thou set thine heart as the heart of God" (vv. 1-2). The prince of Tyre had an ego problem--he thought he was God and assumed he was invincible. As Ezekiel condemns the pride of this king, he makes a dramatic change in verse 11 to the ultimate motivation and source of evil behind him: "Moreover, the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, take up a lamentation upon the king of Tyre, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God: Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth, and I

have set thee so; thou wast on the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee" (vv. 13-15). That description of a perfect and beautiful being who once resided in heaven and in the Garden of Eden can be of none other than Satan.c) Her punishment (v. 4)"Behold, the Lord will cast her out, and he will smite her power in the sea, and she shall be devoured with fire."Every detail in that verse was accomplished by Alexander the Great. During his campaign in Palestine he requested supplies from Tyre. When they refused to assist him, his army took the rubble that was left from the ancient city of Tyre, threw it into the sea to build a half-mile causeway, marched out to the island fortress and defeated the city with the assistance of the navies of surrounding nations. Alexander did in seven months what the Assyrian king Shalmaneser IV couldn't do in five years or the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in thirteen years. But because it was time for God's judgment, the city came crashing down. Today there is nothing of any significance on the ancient site of Tyre.Through Zechariah God is saying He will judge the nations in the future through the Messiah. The historical illustration of how He destroyed one of the most fortified, impregnable cities in the world is only a small token of what He will do when Christ returns. The historical fulfillment concerning Alexander the Great was a confirmation that God will keep His promise concerning His Messianic Kingdom.

3. Of Philistia (vv. 5-7)

a) A frightful retribution"Ashkelon shall see it, and fear; Gaza also shall see it, and be very sorrowful, and Ekron; for her expectations shall be ashamed; and the king shall perish from Gaza, and Ashkelon shall not be inhabited."Moving south, Alexander next came to Philistia. By then the Philistines were shaking in their sandals. They had watched Alexander wipe out the Medo-Persian army in the battle of Issus, sweep with lightning swiftness to Syria to the east and then advance on Phoenicia in the south, decimating an impregnable fortress in seven months. Now that he was heading further south, they panicked--with good reason.Alexander's defeat of Gaza is recorded in detail by first century Greek historian Arrian in The Campaigns of Alexander (2.27). Whereas all the other cities of Philistia were conquered easily because they feared resisting Alexander, Gaza resisted him for five months before they surrendered. As a result Alexander refused to give the people of Gaza the semi-independence he allowed the other cities he had conquered. Curtius, the Latin biographer of Alexander, tells us he had their king, Batis, dragged through the streets of the city until dead (4.6.29). It is amazing that Zechariah's prophecy was given hundreds of years before Alexander was ever born.b) A foreign raid (v. 6)"A bastard [Heb., mamzer, "foreigner" "mongrel"] shall dwell in Ashdod, and I will cut off the pride of the Philistines."The prediction was that the Philistines would lose their country to foreigners or scavengers because they were proud. God broke their pride with Alexander. Today there are no Philistines.c) A faithful remnant (v. 7)"I will take away his blood out of his mouth, and his abominations from between his teeth; but he that remaineth, even he, shall be for our God, and he shall be like a governor in Judah, and Ekron like a Jebusite."In spite of the terrible destruction of the Philistines, there was evidence of God's grace. God's judgment was a purging of the Philistines' idolatry. The Philistine nation is pictured like a man participating in the idolatrous blood sacrifices of pagan worship (cf., Acts 15:20; 1 Cor. 8:4). The divinely designed conquest by Alexander would put an end to their idolatry and cause the remaining Philistines to repent and turn to God.

Remembering the Righteous Remnant

In any time of God's judgment, there's always a place for the repentant remnant. When the prophet Malachi pronounced judgment upon Judah, some faithful Israelites gathered together and began to pray. As a result, "a book of remembrance was written before him [God] for them that feared the Lord" (3:16). The Lord assured them, saying, "They shall be mine ... in that day when I make up my jewels" (v. 17). God always remembers the repentant, no matter what the circumstances of

judgment.

Zechariah prophesies that the Philistine who turned to God would have as many privileges as a governor over Judah. What a tremendous privilege for a Gentile! God didn't say, "Because you were pagans and not Israelites, you are second-class citizens." No. Even though they were formerly pagans, some of the Philistines would be uniquely exalted by God. Those Philistines, symbolized by the city of Ekron, would become like the Jebusites. They were the inhabitants of Jerusalem before David made it his capital. Some of them, like Araunah, whom David respected, (2 Sam. 24:15-25), came to believe in the true God and remained in the city.

B. The Protection by God (v. 8)

1. In the days of Alexander (v. 8a)

"I will encamp about mine house because of the army, because of him that passeth by, and because of him that returneth."

Having conquered Philistia, Alexander's next stop was Jerusalem. But God promised that He would protect His dwelling place. The first part of verse 8 precisely describes Alexander's advance against Jerusalem as recorded in Antiquities of the Jews (11.8.3-5) by Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian. Alexander would never conquer Jerusalem because God would encamp around it and protect it.

Alexander sent word to Jaddua, the high priest at that time, to pay tribute to him. But the nation was already paying tribute to the king of Persia, and Jaddua refused to break his allegiance to that nation. Alexander became enraged and planned to destroy Jerusalem when he had finished his conquest of the Philistine cities. The high priest called the people of Jerusalem to sacrifice to God and pray for deliverance. According to Josephus, God gave the high priest a dream, instructing him to welcome Alexander outside the city when he arrived.

So when Alexander and his army were marching to the city, the high priest, arrayed in purple and scarlet with a miter on his head and carrying a gold plate with God's name engraved on it, led a procession of priests dressed in white. When the conqueror saw this, he saluted the high priest and honored the name of God, saying he had seen a person like the high priest in a dream while in Macedonia. Therefore he treated Jerusalem with kindness and headed on to Egypt. And as Zechariah prophesied, he returned through Palestine without harming Jerusalem or its inhabitants. Alexander judged the nations but he honored the city of Jerusalem through the intervention of God. If God can use a pagan king in such a miraculous way to judge the ungodly and to preserve His people, imagine what He can do with a divine King whose judgment will be all the greater, and who will actually deliver His people! This King of the future will be Christ.

2. At the return of Christ (v. 8b)

"No oppressor shall pass through them any more; for now I have seen with mine eyes."

Here Zechariah prophesies a supernatural and lasting protection that can refer only to the protection provided at the second coming of Christ. All of a sudden the Holy Spirit takes us from Alexander to Jesus Christ. When Christ returns to judge the nations and deliver His people, no nation will ever oppress them again. "I have seen with mine eyes" tells us that God has witnessed all the affliction Israel has encountered, and promises peace through the Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

So we see the human conqueror Alexander was a signpost to keep our eyes on the greater fulfillment yet to come. Christ will come again and judge the nations in a way infinitely beyond anything Alexander ever dreamed of, with might and power beyond the conception of any man. As the whole earth falls under His judgment, God will preserve His people, as Alexander spared them in his day. But He will go far beyond that human conqueror to restore Israel and give them their long-awaited Kingdom.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why must the Messiah return?
2. What is the battle of Armageddon?
3. What does Zechariah 9-14 foretell?
4. Why did God need to encourage the Jewish remnant of Zechariah's day? How did He do that?
5. How is the focus of Zechariah's message in chapter 9-14 different from the preceding chapters? What theme connects both parts of the book?
6. Explain what God's promise of a temporal restoration of Jerusalem was a pledge of.
7. Give an example of a prophecy with a short-term fulfillment that has a greater fulfillment yet future.
8. Identify the two conquerors in view in chapter 9. Who is the first one an historical illustration of?
9. What did Alexander's defeat of the Persian army at Issus lead to?
10. In what way were the people seeing the Lord in the conquests of Alexander (vv. 1, 4)?
11. What did Tyre assume about itself? Why?
12. Identify the source of evil behind the prince of Tyre. Support your answer with Scripture.
13. How did God execute judgment on the seemingly invincible city of Tyre? What is that an historical illustration of?
14. How was Zechariah's prophecy concerning Gath's sorrow and her king precisely fulfilled (v. 5)?
15. In breaking the pride of the Philistines, how did God then demonstrate his grace?
16. Explain the significance of a faithful Philistine being treated like a Jebusite?
17. What prophecy did Zechariah give concerning Jerusalem (vv. 7-8)?
18. Knowing that oppressors did pass through Jerusalem after Alexander, what does the promise of the second half of verse 8 have to refer to?
19. Explain how Christ's judgment of the nations and dealings with Israel will be different from Alexander's?

Pondering the Principles

1. Prophecy has the practical effect of increasing our faith and giving us hope. Its fulfillment demonstrates the faithfulness of God and shows He can be trusted in other areas. Imagine the increased confidence in God the inhabitants of Jerusalem must have had when they realized that their lives had been preserved in fulfillment of a prophecy given a couple hundred years before! Consider the hope they would have experienced when they understood that meant a glorious future awaited them. Are you letting fulfilled prophecy build your faith in God and hope in the future? Several books have been written that discuss how biblical prophecies have been specifically fulfilled (one popular one is Josh McDowell's Evidence That Demands a Verdict, [San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life, 1979]). You might read one of them or use a conservative commentary to study a specific prophecy such as Daniel 9:24-27. Praise God for His faithfulness and thank Him for the hope He has provided for those who know and love Him.
2. It is easy to assume that people who worship other gods are past the point of repentance. But that is a false assumption. God led the pagan city of Nineveh to repent through the preaching of Jonah. Zechariah told us about the faithful remnant of Philistines who would be respected by the Jewish people. Read the short prophecy of Jonah, meditating on God's grace. Endeavor to be an instrument of His mercy toward undeserving people.

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