

The Cleansing of Israel

Scripture: Zechariah 13:1–9

Code: 2170

INTRODUCTION

There's a wonderful day coming for Israel. Zechariah identifies it as a day of spiritual cleansing. He says, "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1).

A. The Patience of the Redeemer

Isaiah 5 tells us why Israel needs to be cleansed.

1. His people

In verse 1 the Lord refers to Israel as a vineyard: "Now will I sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill." God (the "well beloved") planted a vineyard (Israel) on "a very fruitful hill" (Canaan).

2. His preparation

Verse 2 says, "He dug it, and gathered out the stones, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress in it; and he looked for it to bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild [inedible] grapes." God prepared a place for His people in Canaan, waiting for them to become what He desired. But instead they became useless as wild grapes.

3. His perplexity

In verses 3-7 God says, "Inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Why, when I looked for it to bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now, I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge [protection], and it shall be eaten up; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. And I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned, nor digged, but there shall come up briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant; and he looked for justice, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry."

When the vineyard God planted rebelled and brought forth wild grapes, He promised to judge it by removing His protection and care. and withholding His blessing. God promised to judge Israel because of their unbelief and rebellion.

B. The Parable of Rejection

Jesus tells a similar tragic parable in Matthew 21.

1. The Rejected Servants

Verse 33 says, "There was a certain householder, who planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and leased it to tenant farmers, and went into a far country." The householder is God. The vineyard is His Kingdom. The farmers are the religious leaders of Israel, who were entrusted with the responsibility of teaching His truth.

Verses 34-36 say that "when the time of the fruit drew near, [the householder] sent his servants to the farmers, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the farmers took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first; and they did the same unto them." The servants are the prophets that Israel refused to listen to. Jesus said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou ... killest the prophets, and stonest them who are sent unto thee" (Matt. 23:37).

2. The Rejected Son

Verses 37-39 say, "But last of all he sent them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the farmers saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him." Jesus then asked the religious leaders, "When the lord, therefore, of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those farmers?" (v. 40). They answered, "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will lease his vineyard unto other farmers, who will render him the fruits in their seasons" (v. 41).

3. The Rejected Stone

Jesus then replied, "Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits of it. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken, but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spoke of them. But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet" (vv. 42-46). The Jewish leaders might have fulfilled the parable right there and then by killing Jesus, but they feared the crowd.

God planted a vineyard--His Kingdom--and entrusted it to the teachers and leaders of Israel. But when they were held accountable by the prophets He sent, they persecuted the prophets. And when God sent His own Son, whom they should have respected, they ultimately rejected Him and had Him killed. Therefore God took His Kingdom away from them and gave it to those who would bring forth fruit, namely the church. Just as Isaiah indicted the nation for its failure to live up to God's standards, so Jesus indicted the leaders for their sins.

C. The Promise of Restoration

However, that parable does not indicate that God is finished with Israel. In Romans 11 He informs us

that the church is like a branch from a wild olive tree grafted into the natural olive tree of the Abrahamic covenant of blessing. Referring to the Gentile church, Paul says, "If thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree, how much more shall these, who are the natural branches [Israel], be grafted into their own olive tree?... And so all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:24, 26). The time is coming when God will put that natural branch back in the tree.

D. The Product of Repentance

God isn't through with His vineyard Israel. Although Isaiah and Jesus made clear God's attitude toward rebellious people, our God is also a forgiving God. He will cleanse Israel and restore her to her place of blessing.

1. Micah 7:18--Micah wrote, "Who is a God like unto thee, who pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in mercy. He will turn again; he will have compassion on us; he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." All that Israel did in the past to the prophets and to God's Son will be forgiven.

2. Psalm 103:12-14--The psalmist said, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. As a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."

3. Jeremiah 31:34--"They shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

4. Acts 3:19--Peter said, "Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." Forgiveness is available to anyone who repents of his sins and turns to God.

God is a God of forgiveness. He throws our sins into the depths of the sea, removes them as far as the east is from the west, blots them out, and forgets them. God's unchangeable nature will override the seriousness of the sin of rejecting the Messiah. That is the message of Zechariah 13, where God promises to cleanse and forgive Israel.

LESSON

I. CLEANSING FROM THE DEFILEMENT OF SIN (v. 1)

"In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."

A. The Need of the Nation

"In that day" refers to the day of the Lord, which is when Christ returns and Israel repents. "The house of David and ... the inhabitants of Jerusalem" shows the totality of cleansing: it will affect

royalty and commoners. The fountain of forgiveness will cleanse the people of Israel from the defilement of sin. Such forgiveness is the supreme need of Jew and Gentile alike. Every person is a sinner in God's eyes. The apostle Paul said, "There is none righteous, no, not one all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:10, 23).

Israel has been defiled by its historic disobedience to the law of God and its outright rejection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. In Romans 10:3 the apostle Paul says that "they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Israel authored a system of works rather than following the system of faith and grace that God authored. In that state of unbelief, Israel remains guilty before God. In fact the people have committed the greatest sin of all: rejecting Christ.

B. The Character of the Cleansing

But what happens in the day of their repentance is wonderful. Israel will be cleansed with a fountain of forgiveness. The Hebrew word translated "fountain" (maḡor) refers to a spring of water, but is often used symbolically to refer to God as "the fountain of living waters" (Jer. 2:13; 17:13). Psalm 36:9 says, "With thee is the fountain of life." The fountain in Zechariah 13:1 is not used as the source of life or refreshment, but as a means of cleansing and purification. God is going to cleanse Israel of all its filthiness.

The use of the Hebrew word translated "opened" conveys the idea of a continuous, permanent opening. The fountain Zechariah mentions will be a source of perennial purification. The fountain of cleansing was opened at the cross of Calvary, and it's been purifying souls ever since. Yet Israel as a whole has never been purified by it because of its unbelief and hardness of heart. But that will change when the people of Israel come to their Messiah in repentance. They will begin to experience what Christians have been experiencing for over 2000 years--the perennial cleansing of Christ's death and resurrection. First John 1:7 says, "The blood of Jesus Christ ... cleanseth us from all sin." The present-tense verb carries the idea of a continuing cleansing. As long as there is sin, there will be cleansing for the one who believes.

C. The Delineation of the Defilement

The Hebrew word translated "sin" (chattath) refers to that which misses the mark or goes the wrong way. It refers to a sin against man or God--an act of disobedience, indifference, or rebellion. The Hebrew word translated "uncleanness" identifies something to be shunned. In the book of Leviticus it is used to refer to ceremonial impurity such as when an Israelite touched a dead body.

Israel will be cleansed of its moral and ceremonial defilement. Everyone needs that kind of cleansing because everyone is defiled. When Solomon dedicated the Temple, he said, "There is no man who sinneth not" (1 Kings 8:46). David said, "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" ((Ps. 14:2-3; cf., Rom. 3:11-12).

D. The Forgiveness of the Faithful

We are cleansed from our sin when we place our faith in the One who was pierced on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and reconcile us to God. By believing in Him and receiving Him as your Savior, that cleansing can be applied to you.

Israel will one day experience that cleansing nationally. The people will again enjoy a covenantal relationship with God. Only the blood of Christ can provide that. Hebrews 9:13-14 says, "If the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Only the sacrifice of Christ purges the sinner's conscience and transforms his life so that he can willingly serve God.

II. CLEANSING FROM THE DECEPTION OF SPURIOUS PROPHETS (vv. 2-6)

The two besetting sins of Israel have always been idolatry and false prophecy. Wherever idolatry existed, it was the result of false prophets propagating it. But when Christ returns and cleanses Israel from its defilement, He is also going to cleanse the nation from the deception of those false prophets.

A. Exterminated (v. 2)

"It shall come to pass, in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered; and also I will cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land."

Behind false prophecy is an unclean spirit. Psalm 96:5 says, "All the gods of the nations are idols." And Paul tells us that "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons" (1 Cor. 10:20). Behind false prophets and idols (who are thought to be gods) are unclean spirits.

"The unclean spirit" is not a pervading principle but an active agency that standing in direct contrast with "the Spirit of grace and of supplications" (Zech. 12:10). The agency of salvation is God's Spirit of grace, but the agency of idolatry are false prophets, demons, and Satan himself. The wicked spirits who energize false prophets are unclean because they drive their victims into moral impurities and false religion.

B. Executed (v. 3)

"It shall come to pass that, when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother who begot him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the Lord; and his father and his mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth."

After Israel has been cleansed, anyone who tries to prophesy as a false prophet will be killed, even by those who are closely related to him. A mother and father will put their own child to death because they'll have such a hatred of false prophecy, it will overrule normal human feelings. They'll be the first to condemn the apostate to death.

C. Embarrassed (v. 4)

"It shall come to pass, in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed, every one, of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive."

Anyone who is a false prophet when Christ returns will be so ashamed, he won't want to be known as a prophet or even appear as one. The rough garment became the sign of a prophet from the days of Elijah, who was known for wearing a rough garment (1 Kings. 19:13, 19). It was either a goatskin or a piece of clothing woven out of camel's hair. False prophets will fear being identified as deceivers, so they'll deny any association whatsoever with prophecy.

D. Exposed (vv. 5-6)

"But he shall say, I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for man taught me to keep cattle from my youth. And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends [Heb., ahavay, 'lovers']."

In the day of Israel's cleansing, false prophets will deny being prophets and claim to have been farmers all their lives. When they denounce any association with pagan practices, others will challenge them to explain the wounds on their bodies. "Wounds in thine hands" could refer to anywhere on the arms or hands, or even across the torso. Pagans would cut themselves as part of their religious practice. When confronted with the question, the false prophet will have to admit that his wound came from his lovers. Commentator H.C. Leupold identifies those lovers as the idols that the false prophets were in love with (Exposition of Zechariah [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956], p. 249). The self-inflicted wounds from their idolatries will give them away.

III. CLEANSING THROUGH THE DEATH OF THE SHEPHERD (v. 7a)

"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man who is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts; smite the shepherd."

The Spirit of God now contrasts the true Shepherd with the false shepherds, just described as being wounded by their idolatry. Not only will Israel be saved from something (idolatry), but through something as well--the death of the Shepherd. He's just as much a part of Israel's cleansing as anything. In fact Israel couldn't be cleansed from the defilement of sin and the deception of false prophets apart from the Shepherd's death. God is speaking about the death of Christ, the good Shepherd, and the judgment therefore rendered upon sin.

A. The Design of God

The death of Jesus Christ was the plan of God. He called for the sword to strike the Messiah, His "fellow." Jewish people for centuries have pleaded not to be blamed for the death of Christ. But such justification is unnecessary since God Himself takes the responsibility. The hatred of Satan, the fury of the chief priests, the contempt of Herod, and the cowardice of Pilate merely accomplished what

God had designed to do from the very beginning-- before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:18-20).

B. The Deity of Christ

The Hebrew word translated "man" is an uncommon word. It refers to a strong man, not to an ordinary man. "Fellow" refers to a close associate. God identifies Christ as the mighty man of His union. A proper translation of verse 7 could be: "the mighty man who is coequal with Me." It is an affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ, the mighty Shepherd who is God's equal (cf. Phil. 2:6). It is prophetic of Jesus' statement, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus is God. Micah could not have said the Messiah's "goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Mic. 5:2), nor could Isaiah identify Him as "The mighty God" (Isa. 9:6), or Jeremiah call Him "the Lord Our Righteousness" (Jer. 23:5-6) unless the Messiah was equal to God.

IV. CLEANSING FROM THE DISPERSION OF THE SHEEP (v. 7b)

"The sheep shall be scattered [Lit., 'broken in pieces']; and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones."

A. The Scattering Fulfilled

Not only were the disciples scattered after Christ was smitten, but the nation as well. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus quoted Zechariah 13:7, saying, "I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered abroad" (Matt. 26:31). When Jesus was arrested, the first to be scattered were His disciples. But He predicted a greater scattering that occurred in A.D. 70 when Titus conquered Israel. The whole nation--leaderless and confounded, having spurned their Messiah--was scattered all over the world. In a sense God will cleanse Israel from their dispersion when He regathers them. It's exciting to be living in a time when we can begin to see that happening in preparation for the final regathering.

B. The Suffering Foretold

The phrase "I will turn mine hand upon the little ones" I believe refers to the persecution of the Jewish and Gentile believers in the early church. By Acts 5 there may have been 20,000 Jewish believers in the Jerusalem church. And there still are Jewish people today who are being saved today. I believe these "little ones" are the same as the "poor of the flock" in Zechariah 11:7, whom God turned His hand upon. The turning of God's hand refers to chastening and judgment (Ps. 81:14-15; Isa. 1:25; Ezek. 38:12; Amos 1:8). One of the first things the early church experienced was persecution. Acts 9:1 says that Paul before His conversion was "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples" (cf., 8:1). Just after Jesus made wonderful promises to His disciples about enabling them to bear spiritual fruit and receive His Spirit He said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you.... If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 15:18, 20; 16:2).

The message is simple: The good Shepherd would die for the sins of His people, who would be

scattered because they rejected Him. And God would allow even those who were faithful to go through suffering and persecution so that the church might be pure. In the day of cleansing, God will completely regather His scattered flock.

V. CLEANSING FROM THE DEVASTATION OF SLAUGHTER (vv. 8-9a)

"It shall come to pass that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts in it shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will test them as gold is tested."

In the Battle of Armageddon there will be terrible slaughter. Zechariah prophesies it will take the lives of two-thirds of the people of Israel. Some do not take that amount literally since Isaiah mentions a tenth being spared (Isa. 6:13). But clearly the majority of the people of Israel will die, and only a portion will survive the Battle of Armageddon. The Antichrist and the armies of the world will attempt to wipe out the entire nation, but they will fail. The remaining third will be the believing remnant who look upon Christ in repentance at His return (Zech. 12:10), and will include the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7:4. They are the survivors whose hearts were prepared and who enter the earthly Kingdom in their physical bodies. The Tribulation will be an unprecedented refining process for the nation of Israel.

VI. CLEANSING THROUGH THE DECISION OF THE SOUL (v. 9b)

"They shall call on my name, and I will hear them. I will say, It is my people; and they shall say, The Lord is my God."

The cleansing of Israel is a sovereign act of God, but it occurs in concert with the will of the people of Israel. God does not sovereignly redeem His people apart from their faith in Him. The people that were "not my people" (Heb., lo ammi) will become "my people" (Heb., ammi), according to God's prophecy in Hosea 1:9-11. From the midst of their fiery ordeal the remnant of Israel will see Jesus Christ and they call upon Him as their Lord. Their decision will consummate their cleansing. Isaiah said, "The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa. 35:10). What a blessed consummation!

Our God is a forgiving God who will forgive His people Israel even though they descended from those who killed His Son. Who is a pardoning God like that? Do you know of any other? Because we are sinners, we need a God who can take away our sin. The fountain is open for all who will come. There is no need to wait.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In Isaiah's parable of the vineyard, why was God seemingly perplexed (Isa. 5:3-4).
2. How did God promise to judge Israel for her rebellion (Isa. 5:5-6)?
3. In Jesus' parable of the householder, identify the servants and the farmers. How did the farmers treat the servants (Matt. 21:33-36)?
4. What did the chief priests and Pharisees who heard the parable conclude that the lord would do after the farmers had killed his son? How did they react to Jesus' parable? Why (Matt. 21:41-46)?
5. To whom did Israel forfeit the Kingdom? Does that mean that God is finished with Israel? Support your answer with Scripture.
6. What will allow Israel to be restored to her place of blessing? Support your answer with Scripture.
7. Is spiritual cleansing needed only by Israel? Support your answer with Scripture.
8. What relationship did Israel have to God's righteousness, according to Romans 10:3?
9. What is the greatest sin Israel remains guilty of?
10. Describe the fountain that will be opened to Israel.
11. Explain how cleansing from sin takes place today.
12. What alone can purge the sinner's conscience? What will that purging result in?
13. Identify the two besetting sins of Israel and the source of each.
14. What do those sins drive their victims into?
15. What will happen to false prophets after Israel has been cleansed (vv. 3-5)?
16. Who ultimately takes responsibility for the death of Christ? Explain (1 Pet. 1:18-20).
17. What does verse 7 imply about the nature of the smitten shepherd? List some Scripture references that explicitly teach the same thing.
18. At what times were the sheep of the smitten shepherd dispersed?
19. Whom did God say He would "turn His hand upon"? What did Jesus say to confirm that reality (v. 7)?

20. Who will survive the Battle of Armageddon (vv. 8-9)?

21. As a result of their spiritual refining, what will those survivors do and say (v. 9)?

22. Will the cleansing of Israel be purely a sovereign act of God? Explain.

Pondering the Principles

1. Divine forgiveness is a precious commodity. It is as necessary to us as air. Without it we would be eternally separated from God and trapped with unresolvable guilt in this life. Are you sensitive to the sins you commit against man and God? Are you quick to confess them and restore a right relationship with both? Meditate on Micah 7:18. Take a moment to praise the Lord that He "is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" as we confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:9, NASB). Pray you might have an opportunity to share that great truth with someone this week, giving them hope of forgiveness no matter how serious the sin.

2. Zechariah 13 affirms that God uses suffering in the lives of His people. In doing so He desires not only to purge false believers, but also to strengthen the true believers. Jesus and the New Testament writers guaranteed that believers would encounter suffering (John 15:18, 20; 2 Tim. 3:12). When you experience it, do you joyfully accept it as part of God's purpose in your life (James 1:2-4)? If you are currently suffering or know someone who is, pray that you will develop great spiritual strength and trust in our faithful Lord, who has compassion on us and a deep awareness of our human frailties (Ps. 103:14).

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