

Haggai/Zechariah Introduction

CHALLENGED, EMPOWERED, RESTORED

People who move far away from their home—overseas perhaps—and then return after some years often say that it can be hard to fit back into life. Things are never quite the same again. This was the experience of the people ministered to by Haggai and Zechariah.

Unlike most of the Old Testament prophets, Haggai and Zechariah were *restoration* prophets—they spoke to God’s people who had returned to the land of Judah *after* their exile in Babylon. This was roughly 500 years before Christ. To understand the messages of these prophets, it’s helpful to put ourselves in the shoes of the people at that time. How did they come to be in their current situation? What were their circumstances? What did the future hold for them?

In Moses’ time, God had made a covenant (a formal agreement) with his people Israel. For their part, they pledged allegiance to the Lord and his covenant. This covenant was conditional on the people’s obedience. If they followed the Lord’s ways and obeyed him faithfully, he would bless them. He would be their God and they would be his people, and he would give them the land and all they needed in abundance.

If they did *not* obey him—especially if they worshipped other gods—they would suffer the curses of that covenant: they would lose the blessings, be punished with drought, famine and need, and be removed from the land.

This is exactly what happened. God’s people disobeyed him, and worshipped other gods. They stubbornly refused to listen to the prophets he sent to warn them. They broke the covenant, would not return to him, and so brought the covenant’s curses down on their own heads. First the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the powerful Assyrians in 722 BC. Most of the people were deported or dispersed. About 140 years later the southern kingdom of Judah suffered a similar fate, again as punishment for their idolatry and rejection of the Lord. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah, progressively seizing control of its royal family, its people and finally its capital, Jerusalem. The Babylonian conquest was excessively violent and brutal. There were multiple sieges of Jerusalem. And the final one devastated its people, who were reduced to committing atrocities to survive. The scenes they witnessed were burnt into their minds. Finally, those who survived were carried off to Babylon as captives.

After seventy years of captivity, their new overlord, the Persian king, Cyrus, decreed they could go back to their homeland—just as God had promised through the prophet Jeremiah. And so the first group of God’s people returned, keen to be home and have a fresh start.

A *long* time had passed. But the traumatic events surrounding the capture of Jerusalem and captivity meant questions lurked in the back of their minds ... Where was God in the midst of their national disaster? How could they worship now without the temple? What about the covenant? Had God’s promises failed? Were they still God’s people? These questions hung over the people who returned. What would it be like to be home again?

We might wonder how things so long ago could still impact people seventy years later. Some who returned to the land weren't even born when Jerusalem fell. Many were too young to remember what life had been like. But the effects of traumatic national events linger. Today, about seventy years after the Holocaust, the dreadful memory of it—the pain and suffering it caused—is alive in Jewish consciousness. In a similar way, seventy years after the fall of Jerusalem, the horror of their capture and captivity was seared into the minds of God's people as they started to return home.

And so with mixed feelings—eager to return to their homeland, but still remembering the tragedy of the past—a group went back to Judah. With an initial burst of enthusiasm, they rebuilt the altar and laid the foundations of the temple. But they got side-tracked building their own houses and working their farms. Their enthusiasm for God's work fizzled. They stagnated spiritually, and for almost twenty years no further work was done on the temple. What was *God's plan* for the people now? They needed leaders—civil leaders for the community, and spiritual leaders to help them be what they truly were—the people of God.

Despite all appearances, God's promises and his plan had *not* failed. The people's disobedience had been punished; and the exile was over. The people Haggai and Zechariah spoke to were living back in the land, but what was supposed to be their fresh start as the people of God seemed to be on shaky ground. It was vitally important that they had leaders appointed by God as they started again. So God raised up Haggai and Zechariah with messages to challenge, empower and restore his people.

God's main message through Haggai was to challenge the people to get their priorities right. They were to stop concentrating on their own comfort and instead put God first. They had struggled to eke out an existence in the land because they hadn't followed him wholeheartedly. Now God promised that if they did, he would again supply all their needs—abundantly. The temple symbolised the Lord's special presence among his people, and it was the proper place for them to worship him. Through Haggai, the Lord urged them to make him their top priority, and rebuild his temple. Haggai's message was meant to challenge and spur the people into action.

Haggai's message from God was quite short and relatively straightforward. In contrast, Zechariah's message was longer and more complex, with numerous visions (pictures to explain or reveal messages from the Lord). At first glance, these can seem (frankly) ... very strange and perhaps off-putting. But these pictures that are so unfamiliar to us were not necessarily so strange to Zechariah's audience. Many of the things in the visions were part of their everyday lives.

For example, in Zechariah's first vision there is a man mounted on a horse with red, brown and white horses behind him. "What on earth does this mean?" we might wonder. But Zechariah's audience would have understood mounted horsemen. Persia was the superpower at the time. Persian rulers used mounted horsemen regularly for surveillance. They used to patrol the vast Persian empire. These horsemen did two things: they brought reports back to the rulers, and they reminded conquered peoples who was in charge, and that they were being watched. In Zechariah's vision, these horsemen were *God's*. They reported to *him*. In the vision, we see who's *really* in charge: not Persia, the super-power, but the Almighty God.

Frequently Zechariah asks what certain details or visions mean. An interpreting angel explains the visions to him. In the second vision, there are ‘four horns’. In the Bible, horns often represent strength. These ‘horns’ have added meaning. Powerful, aggressive animals use their horns to attack. These ‘four horns’ represent all the nations who had attacked Israel, goring, tearing, and scattering her: Assyria, Babylon, Edom and others. The point of this vision is that the Lord was about to throw down these nations that had treated his people too harshly. He would bring justice for his people.

Sometimes, a vision will be more difficult to understand. In chapter 4 a lampstand fed by oil and two olive trees are mentioned. The description of the lampstand is complicated and difficult to visualise. But examples of these lampstands have been unearthed by archaeologists. The people then were familiar with them. The point of the vision is that two men were being anointed to serve the Lord by leading the people. Zechariah’s vision was God’s public stamp of approval on these men. They were probably Joshua and Zerubbabel. Joshua was the high priest who would be their spiritual leader, and Zerubbabel was the nation’s civic leader, responsible for rebuilding the temple. God had chosen and empowered his people for his service. So usually, even if we don’t understand all the details of a vision, we can be encouraged by what we *do* understand. It’s also helpful to realise that even Bible scholars are not entirely sure of what *all* the details mean. So, you might be in good company.

These visions in Zechariah’s message are typical of apocalyptic writing. ‘Apocalyptic’ just means ‘unveiling’ or ‘revealing’ the future. This type of writing contains revelations, especially about the end times and God’s eternal kingdom. Through Zechariah’s message, the Lord was revealing:

- things in the immediate future (what the people in Haggai and Zechariah’s time should do),
- the coming of the Messiah (some 500 years in the future for them),
- and the ultimate ‘day’ (that final ‘day of the Lord’) when people from many nations will come to worship him.

Just like Haggai’s prophecy, God intended that Zechariah’s message would also *challenge* his people and spur them into action—to live godly, faithful lives. Zechariah’s message was also meant to *encourage* God’s people. It answers many of those burning questions that their defeat and exile had raised.

- Where was God in the midst of their national disaster? The Lord always was, and still is in control of world events, even those events that swept his people away. He now promised to bring them peace and justice.
- Their sin, which had caused their exile, was removed from them (we see this in the vision of the woman in a basket being carried away). With their sin removed, the Lord was now once more with this remnant of his people who had returned. He promised, “I will *return* to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt” (1:16). God’s personal presence was one of his age-old promises to his people. Just before the exile and the destruction of the temple, God’s presence had left the temple. But now, despite the discipline of exile, he was returning to them.
- How could they worship now? God would make Israel’s leaders effective again. The Lord promised Zerubbabel that he would successfully rebuild the temple. And in chapter 3’s vision, Joshua the high priest has his filthy garments (his sin) taken from him. He is dressed in clean clothes, and commissioned to serve in his official role as high priest once again.

This means that God was empowering and reinstating the priesthood so that the people could worship as the Lord required.

Once again, God's people would have the temple, the high priest and priesthood, and leader of God's own choosing.

- What about God's covenant promises? And were the people still *God's* people? Through Zechariah, the Lord promised, "I will restore them because I have compassion on them. *They will be as though I had not rejected them*" (10:6b). In exile, they were rejected, but now they—and the covenant—were restored. They now had a future that was bright and peaceful.
- Would the promise of a Messiah still hold true? Another important aspect of Zechariah's message is the promise of a future king like David, but greater than David: the Messiah. He would be both king and priest (6:13), he would come to Jerusalem humbly, riding on a donkey, and he would cleanse and purify the people from their sin (3:9, 13:1). From the New Testament, we learn that this is Jesus. Like Isaiah before him (Is. 53), Zechariah also knew that this Promised One, the Messiah, would suffer. He would be pierced (Zech 12:10), and he would be a shepherd who was 'struck' and his sheep would be scattered (13:7). The Messiah would come—God's plan to rescue everyone who trusts in him was still in place. And ultimately God would bring about justice for his people, and people from many nations would join them. We're part of that.

In the last few chapters of Zechariah, this King comes in victory. These chapters looked forward to Jesus' victory over God's enemies through his death on the cross. This also looks forward, still, to his ultimate victory in the day of the Lord, when his kingdom will be established finally and fully. Small wonder that the book of Revelation draws significantly on Zechariah's message.

Haggai and Zechariah's messages from the Lord leave us with the assurance that he was in control of past events, he is in control of our present, and he is supremely in control of the future. It may sometimes seem that political events are spiralling out of control. On the news we hear things that deeply disturb, even frighten, us. But we can rest secure in the certainty that the Lord is in control of all these events, just as he always has been.

If, at any point during your study, you get a bit bogged down in complexity (especially in Zechariah) remember the big picture. When God's people were despondent, discouraged and self-absorbed, he patiently called to them and challenged them. Through this, he showed them that, after all their disobedience, he still wanted them to be *his* people. In spite of *their* unfaithfulness, *he* was still faithful to them, and to his promises to their forefathers. After all they'd been through, he was still their God. He would still send the promised Messiah. Therefore, he didn't want them to waste this fresh start he'd given them. He wanted them to serve him wholeheartedly, with confidence: "Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong" (8:13). He wanted them to live godly lives, treating one another with respect and love.

Through the messages of Haggai and Zechariah, so long ago, the Lord still speaks to us. Like his people then, we can also become despondent, discouraged and self-absorbed. God still calls to *us* and challenges us. Even though we disobey him, God still wants *us* to be his people. In spite of *our* unfaithfulness, God is still faithful. After all Jesus went through for us, God doesn't want us to waste the fresh start he's given us. *We, too*, need to serve him wholeheartedly, make him our highest priority, our deepest allegiance. Like God's people so many centuries ago, we too, have been restored. But for us it is a perfect restoration, achieved by the Son of God himself, in whom we put our trust. And by giving us his Spirit, he has empowered us to live with him and serve him always.

Like the people of Haggai and Zechariah's day, we, too, have been challenged, empowered and restored.