

## ***Session 1: “Why Study the Book of Zechariah?” & “Understanding Its Historical Context”***

### **I. THE WHOLE BOOK OF ZECHARIAH IS ABOUT JERUSALEM**

- A. The whole book of Zechariah is about Jerusalem. ***Why care about Jerusalem?*** We care because Jesus is zealous for Jerusalem and will return to live there forever. He has great affection for this city. We ask the Spirit to teach us what He sees and feels about Jerusalem. I want to be zealous for whatever Jesus is zealous for. In the Scripture, *Zion* usually speaks of Jerusalem.
- 2“I am zealous for Zion with great zeal ...<sup>3</sup>I will return to Zion, and dwell in the midst...” (Zech. 8:2-3)***
- B. Jesus’ worldwide government will be in Jerusalem, and all nations will be gathered there. We are to understand this simply because it is important to Jesus and because we know God’s eternal and end-time purposes are “Jerusalem-centric.”
- 17“Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the LORD, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem.” (Jer. 3:17)***
- C. We easily neglect Jerusalem, because we do not see how it affects our ministry, money, and relationships. What happens in Jerusalem is a witness to the nations of God’s leadership and faithfulness to His Word. The issue of Jerusalem is an issue of His sovereignty and faithfulness to follow through on what He has declared. He put His name on Jerusalem and her people, and attached His glory to them. If we care about the glory of God, then we will care about Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the stage on which the end-time drama will be played out before all the nations.
- D. ***Jerusalem is a unique model:*** Jerusalem is a picture that gives us understanding of how God will deal with the nations. We must understand what the Scripture says about the blessings and judgments on Jerusalem because of the principle that I call ***“like kind, but lesser degree.”*** Both the glory and judgments that God will release on Israel in the Tribulation and in the Millennium will be released in ***“like kind, but to a lesser degree”*** on the nations and the Church in this age.
- E. We must become familiar with what happened in the days of Zerubbabel because it is part of our story. From God’s view, the temple in the past and future is the ***“house of prayer”*** (Isa. 56:7). Jesus affirmed this, highlighting its purpose as being a place of prayer and worship (Mt. 21:13). Therefore, the book of Zechariah is also about the prayer movement in Jerusalem. We can look at how the Lord related to Zechariah and Zerubbabel, and see how He will relate to the leaders of Jerusalem and those deeply involved in building houses of prayer at the end of the age.
- F. All who love Jerusalem are to rejoice with her by standing for Jerusalem’s prophetic destiny. We are to rejoice with Jerusalem instead of being critical, disinterested, or disengaged. We mourn for her by understanding her pressures and failures and praying for God’s help and mercy.

<sup>10</sup>***“Rejoice with Jerusalem...all you who love her...all you who mourn for her.” (Isa. 66:10)***

- G. God loves Jerusalem, and Satan hates her. God’s zeal is set on Jerusalem—what does He see? Jerusalem is mentioned over 800 times, and Zion 160 times in Scripture, with other references to it under other names. Jerusalem continues forever (2 Chr. 33:4; Ps. 48:8; Joel 3:20; Mic. 4:7).

<sup>2</sup>***The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. (Ps. 87:2)***

- H. ***Battle for Jerusalem:*** The battle for the control of Jerusalem is an intense spiritual, political, and military battle; engaging in this battle is a priority in the Spirit. All nations will gather against Jerusalem, while the whole Church gathers “spiritually” for Jerusalem (12:3; 14:2).
- I. ***The uniqueness of Jerusalem:*** Jesus has made unique commitments to glorify Jerusalem as well as to judge, or cleanse, it. Jerusalem has a unique impact on history. Many nations have been affected by their choice to bless or curse Israel.

<sup>3</sup>***I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you... (Gen. 12:3)***

- J. Jerusalem is unique in blessing. God promises to prosper any who will love and pray for Jerusalem, because God’s house, or temple, is in Jerusalem forever.

<sup>6</sup>***Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you...” <sup>9</sup>*Because of the house of the LORD our God [the temple in Jerusalem] I will seek your good. (Ps. 122:6-9)****

## **II. ZECHARIAH THE PROPHET**

- A. Zechariah was from a priestly family, so he understood the priestly office and the temple. He was a young man when God called him to be a prophet (2:4). His family returned from the Babylonian exile in 536 BC (Neh. 12:1-4). It is probable that Zechariah came with them as a very young boy. Thus, we conclude that Zechariah’s family was devout and courageous because they went on the 700-mile, five-month trip through the wilderness to build the “house of prayer.”
- B. Zechariah was martyred because of the message he spoke. (Mt. 23:35; Lk. 11:51).
- C. The messianic prophecies of Zechariah are second only to Isaiah’s.

## **III. ZECHARIAH’S FIVE MESSAGES**

1. Calling Israel to ***obedience*** (1:1-6)
2. The one night containing ***eight visions*** (1:7-6:15)
3. The necessity of ***fasting*** (7-8)
4. Israel’s ***deliverance, empowerment, and regathering*** (9-11)

5. Israel’s *salvation, refinement, and transformation* (12-14)

**IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ZECHARIAH: KNOWING THE STORYLINE**

- A. Zechariah’s message is set within the context of Israel’s greatest national crisis in the Old Testament. Most of the people were taken as captives to Babylon to live in “work camps” for seventy long years (606-536 BC). This was an unprecedented tragedy on several levels.
- B. The dramatic story of rebuilding the house of prayer in the days of Zerubbabel, from 538-516 BC, is a powerful encouragement to those seeking to build a house of prayer in this hour. From God’s view, the temple in the past and future is His house of prayer. Isaiah was the first in Scripture to refer to the temple as the *house of prayer* (Isa. 56:7). Jesus called the temple the *house of prayer*, because its purpose was first and foremost to be a place of encounter with God in prayer and worship. It was to function as a worship sanctuary that continued night and day.
- C. This drama started when God told Jeremiah a few decades ahead of time that Israel would go into captivity for 70 years. He prophesied that God would “visit” them and cause them to return.  
***<sup>10</sup>Thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. (Jer. 29:10)***
- D. This story is told in three passages (Ezra 1-6; Hag. 1-2; Zech. 3-8); it highlights four leaders who worked together in Jerusalem to help the remnant rebuild the house of prayer. They are Zerubbabel and Joshua, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.
1. **Zerubbabel**: The governor of Judah functioned as an apostolic leader; he was responsible for mobilizing the people to build the house of prayer buildings (the temple complex).
  2. **Joshua**: The high priest was responsible for overseeing the administration of the day-to-day functions of the priests and Levites in the house of prayer.
  3. **Haggai**: The older prophet gave four messages in five months in 520 BC (Aug.-Dec.).
  4. **Zechariah**: Zechariah prophesied in the same time period as Haggai (Ezra 5:1). Haggai was the older prophet; his ministry is recorded for only a period of four months. They overlapped by one month as contemporaries, but Zechariah continued to prophesy after Haggai. We must study them together because Zechariah builds upon the truths highlighted in Haggai’s prophecies. He received his longest prophecy on the night of February 15, 519 BC, which consisted of eight visions (Zech. 1:7-6:8). A main theme in these eight visions was to build the house of prayer (Zech. 1:16; 4:6-10; 6:12-13).
- E. The two Persian kings: **Cyrus** (600-530 BC) released and financed the Jewish captives to return from 70 years of Babylonian captivity to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem in 536 BC (Ezra 1). **Darius** helped the remnant with finances in their efforts to rebuild the temple in 520 BC (Ezra 6).

## V. OVERVIEW OF THE STORY

- A. **A rich prophetic story:** The prophetic history of the remnant was amazing—it included Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Cyrus.
1. About 200 years before King Cyrus (750 BC), Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would release the remnant of Israel from Babylon to go to Jerusalem and build the temple (Isa. 44:28).
  2. About 200 years later, Jeremiah prophesied that Israel would go into captivity, but would be released after seventy years to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (Jer: 25; 29).
  3. More than fifty years after Jeremiah, Daniel, inspired by the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, sought the Lord with fasting and prayer (Dan. 9).
  4. A few years later, the Spirit stirred up King Cyrus to free Israel and give them “millions” of dollars (Ezra 1) to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the house of prayer.
- B. With a rich prophetic history behind them, about 50,000 Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Ezra says they were “stirred by the Spirit” to do this (Ezra 1:5). It was real, but it did not last. They arrived, and soon built the foundation and established musicians and singers who sang responsively (Ezra 3:10-11).
- <sup>10</sup>When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood...to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. <sup>11</sup>And they sang responsively...All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3:10-11)***
- C. The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem took five months, covering about 700 miles (Ezra 7:9). The remnant returned to a city and temple that had been desolate for seventy years, since Babylonian armies destroyed it in 586 BC. They returned with the goal of building the temple and reestablishing the worship order that David had been commanded to establish (2 Chr. 29:25).
- D. After arriving in Jerusalem, they lost their excitement within two years. In that time, they laid the foundation of the temple, and then, because of opposition from enemies, along with an economic and agriculture crisis, they **quit for sixteen years** (535-520 BC).
- E. There were three main obstacles in Jerusalem. The **Samaritans** moved into the land after Israel went into captivity, and aggressively opposed the remnant of Israel (Ezra 4:1-5, 24). The **remnant of Israel** struggled with spiritual lethargy, compromise, and fear (Hag. 1:1-11; Zech. 1:1-6). The **economic crisis** was intensified by drought and agricultural failure (Hag. 1:1-11).

- F. The house of prayer was rebuilt over a 22-year period (538-516 BC). The two most important dates to remember are **536 BC**, when they laid the foundation of the temple and then quit in discouragement (Ezra 3:10; 4:24), and **520 BC** when they restarted their labors (Ezra 5:1-2).

## **VI. EZRA 1-6: SIGNIFICANT EVENTS (538-515 BC)**

- A. Ezra 1-6 describes significant events related to building the house of prayer.
- B. In 538 BC, Cyrus king of Persia (modern-day Iran) defeated the nation of Babylon (modern-day Iraq). Within a year of his victory over Babylon, Cyrus made a surprising decree to free the Jewish captives from Babylon and allow them to return to Jerusalem to build the house of prayer. He helped them financially (Ezra 1:1-5). The king of Persia assigned a stipend from the royal treasury for the support of the singers (Ezra 6:10). There were full-time singers and musicians in Zerubbabel’s day (Ezra 2:65; Neh. 12:45-47).
- C. Ezra 1-2 is a description of the 50,000 exiles that returned from Babylon. After seventy years in captivity, there were over a million Israelites living in Babylon. They had families and jobs, and life was better, since King Cyrus had just freed them. Only those with conviction made the long journey back to Jerusalem. They returned, not because life in Babylon was hard, but because they believed what the Lord had spoken about building the temple in Jerusalem. Leaving was harder than staying, but this company of people made the journey.
- D. To leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem was costly. Imagine this group of people and the kind of conviction they must have had to leave their comfortable lives, journey across the desert, and leave behind everything that was familiar to them to come to a ruined city to rebuild the temple. They were men and women of faith. These were the “fiery” ones. When they got to Jerusalem, the temple was just a pile of rubble.
- E. In the seventh month of their first year in Jerusalem (536 BC) the altar was built (Ezra 3:1-2). In the second year, they began to work on rebuilding the temple itself (Ezra 3:8-9).
- F. Some months later, when the foundation of the temple had been laid, they celebrated. The older men wept because it seemed so small compared to Solomon’s temple (Ezra 3:10-12).
- <sup>10</sup>When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood...with trumpets, and the Levites...with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. <sup>11</sup>And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD... All the people shouted with a great shout...because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. <sup>12</sup>But...the old men who had seen the first temple wept. (Ezra 3:10-12)***
- G. Adversaries arose against those who were building the house of prayer, and the construction stopped in 535 BC. The Jews were discouraged and troubled. Their enemies (v. 4) hired counselors to frustrate them (v. 5) and wrote accusations to the government (v. 6) against them.

***<sup>1</sup>When the adversaries of Judah...heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the LORD...<sup>4</sup>The people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building, <sup>5</sup>and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose. (Ezra 4:1-5)***

- H. The Persian government intervened and stopped the Jews from building the temple (v. 24).  
***<sup>24</sup>Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased [535 BC], and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius [520 BC]. (Ezra 4:24)***
- I. The Jews became discouraged in the face of obstacles and opposition. It is one of the saddest stories. They lost their vision and sense of purpose. They had made a big move in coming back to Jerusalem to build the temple, but now they did not want to do it. Opposition and economic problems caused them to be discouraged and preoccupied (Hag. 1; Zech. 8:10).
- J. Consider the 50,000 who went on that 700-mile trip and joined “staff.” Sixteen years later they were saying, “Why are we here?” They made a five-month trip through the wilderness to go and build the house of prayer. They started out with deep conviction. They were the ones that originally said yes.
1. Yet these are the same people, a little while later, who are in pain over the insignificance of their labors. They might have said, “What I am doing is worthless. I am here with a bunch of unanointed prayer leaders. I am broke and tired. I am doing this fasting thing. I do not like anything anymore. What am I doing here? This feels like prison.”
  2. God would have replied, “No, it is not a prison. You are not wasting your life. It is your destiny of glory beyond anything that you can imagine. For such a time as this, you have come into the kingdom.” They said, “Yes, but the beginnings are so small.” That was the common error that the 50,000 were making.
- K. After a delay of sixteen years (535-520 BC), God sent prophets to stir up the leaders to start building. Due to the opposition and discouragement, the people had stopped the construction of the temple and were focusing on their own houses and building their own lives. Through Zechariah and Haggai, the Lord brought correction and direction to them to begin anew.  
***<sup>1</sup>Then [in 520 BC ] the prophet Haggai and Zechariah...prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah...<sup>2</sup>So Zerubbabel...and Jeshua...rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them. (Ezra 5:1-2)***
- L. After about five years (520-516 BC) of hard work, they completed the temple (Ezra 6:15-16). They were depressed and hurting financially, but even in the face of difficulty, God wanted them to build the house of prayer. He promised to supply their economic needs (Hag. 1-2).

***<sup>14</sup>The elders of the Jews built, and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah...and they built and finished it...<sup>15</sup>The temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar...in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius [515 BC]. (Ezra 6:14-15)***