Return to Me

Chad Bailey | Midway Presbyterian Church | Evening Service | October 11, 2026

Scripture: Zechariah 1:1-6

Zechariah 1:1 In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, **2** "The LORD was very angry with your fathers. **3** Therefore say to them, Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. **4** Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. **5** Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? **6** But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.'"

Introduction

Will you take your copy of God's word and turn with me to the book of Zechariah? We are in another minor prophet, starting a series in Zechariah in the evenings. We'll look at verses 1 through 6.

This is happening, as we find in the first verse, in the 8th month and the second year of Darius. This would be October, November of the year 520 BC, some 18 years after the exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem under Cyrus's decree and they had begun the rebuilding project and there was some discouragement set in.

And you may wonder why? Why Zechariah? I think that so many people have noted and I had some say to me even earlier this evening, how difficult the book Zechariah is and so many commentaries say it's perhaps one of the most difficult books of the Bible because there are lots of visions early on that you'll encounter and there are some challenges. But it's also at the same time one of the most hopeful books, one of the most encouraging books.

Zechariah, along with Haggai, are writing to God's people in a time of great discouragement, trouble, and turmoil. And they are writing to encourage them to press on, to keep their eyes fixed on the Lord. And perhaps there's a tendency in that kind of discouragement to ask ourselves, to ask themselves, as well as us, "Has the Lord forgotten us? Does he remember what we're going through and remember his promises"? And Zechariah comes through to say "Yes, the Lord, the Lord does remember. He remembers His people and His promises and all of it. He has not forgotten." And there's a great need of encouragement that presses us on, that reminds us of the hope that is ours in the Lord. And so that's what we'll look at this evening.

The people at this time, those exiles are returning from the land of Babylon to Jerusalem. Perhaps there was an initial enthusiasm, you might say, but it was met pretty quickly with disappointment. They came back to a land of ruin and rubble. You can read about this in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, specifically Ezra chapters one through six. And you can read of some of the opposition and the challenges, the difficulties. There was opposition from the

outside and disappointments even from the inside. And perhaps they had begun to wonder in their discouragement and by all the letters being written to stop their work and stop their progress, “Has the Lord changed his mind? Has the Lord forgotten?” In the midst of that opposition, in turmoil and trouble and struggle, they were greatly discouraged and stopped the work. And there was something wrong, you might say, not with their circumstances, but their perspective, something wrong with what they thought about God. Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish minister many years ago of course, said that Christ charges me to believe his daylight at midnight. It's a reminder that sometimes our circumstances very much looked like, well God surely has forgotten. His promises don’t seem to match up and we didn’t expect it to be this hard, this difficult. We didn’t expect to run into opposition and trouble. And we wonder and doubt and question, and that’s where they are, that’s where the people of God are, as they return from exile and face all kinds of opposition. And I wonder if that’s what you think about even today, maybe you are there and wonder if God remembers. Has God forgotten me and my situation, my position? Doesn’t He know what He’s promised?

Jesus would have to remind his own disciples of the very thing – that God does not forget, God does not forget his people. Are not 5 sparrows sold for 2 pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. He's arguing from the lesser to the greater. It's God who created sparrows. They’re his creatures and He even cares for them, looks out for them, remembers them. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows. And God would say that to his people, he's not forgotten them. He knows the turmoil and the circumstances. In fact, Zechariah's very name would be like preaching that kind of message over and over again. I know perhaps sometimes it's possible to go too far in what a name means and all of that, but sometimes, it is the very message and the heart of the message that God is saying to his people. Zechariah's name means “the Lord remembers”, and He does, He remembers his covenant. He remembers his promises in Christ. In fact, they are unfailing promises. Michael Barrett writes that “The principal theme of Zechariah's preaching was hope in God's unfailing purpose. Hope is the future perspective of faith, and the Godward gaze is the secret to hope.” So, Zechariah points the people to God, his power, his authority, his covenant faithfulness, and his Christ. And it's that promise, it's Christ, the heart of God's promise to be assured of every other word. For all the promises of God are yes and Amen in Christ. And Zechariah is pointing God's people to that over and over. In fact, the visions are a reference to that. As maybe difficult as they might be, He's going to give great assurance of his promise to restore, his promises that find all their fulfillment in Christ. And as the people have returned, they've returned to the land, they started the building project, and yet God was reminding them, saying to them in the very opening words that while they had stopped the building project, there was a bigger issue going on. It was never really about the brick and mortar, you might say, the physical components of that. It was always about God himself. God had wanted them to return to Him. And you'll see that in this passage.

I. The Priority the Lord Establishes

And I think you see three things regarding that, that there's a priority that the Lord establishes early on in verses one through three, maybe even a priority to recover in those days where they had forgotten, they stopped, they were discouraged. And what did they need most? Maybe you wonder that too, when you have times of discouragement and doubt and trouble in life, and you think, well, what I need most is the Lord to fix my problem. The Lord to get me out of a

circumstance, the Lord to change my situation. That's not where Zechariah takes them. And that's not where he takes us either. It's perhaps not how you would give preaching classes to those who would be called to preach in seminaries and teach them that sort of thing.

The Lord Is the Priority

I know he starts with verse two, “The Lord was very angry with your fathers.” Maybe that's a bit of a shock. It points out what's going on when they stopped the work and all of the discouragements to that end, all the opposition they faced. You might say, well they stopped because people were writing letters and making threats and discouraging them in that way. Well, Zechariah, the word of the Lord comes to Zechariah and seems to suggest something else. A certain priority that they had forgotten. The Lord would direct their attention not to the temple per se. Not to Jerusalem and rebuilding the wall, but to Himself. He's the great priority, you might say, to recover - the Lord Himself. Do you see who is speaking to these discouraged people? It's the God who tells them to return to the Lord of hosts. They might be weak, he is not. They might feel powerless in the midst of all the opposition. Several times he's referred to and refers to Himself as the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the armies, the one who is almighty and powerful. And they had taken their eyes off that, you might say and feared man and feared those around them rather than trusting the Lord. They surely felt forgotten and powerless and all of that. But God is saying to them, “Return to me, says the Lord of Hosts”, that's what was most important. He’s referencing the previous generation, but he's saying that to the current generation, “The Lord was very angry with your fathers.” What's needed then? Not that you simply rebuild the temple and carry on in that work per se. That's not the real issue, it is that somehow you have wandered from me, he says. And there's a great need to return to the Lord.

The Call to Return

It's the language of repentance. It is the great need. It was the great need in Zechariah's time and it's the need in our time. That's what the Lord would call sinners to, as Pastor Cruse prayed earlier. And reminding ourselves that Jesus would come preaching, Mark highlights that as his first words in his first sermon - to “repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Calling sinners to repentance is what's going on here in Zechariah, calling them to return to the Lord in repentance and faith. It is a call to come to the Lord, perhaps like we find in Luke's gospel, the prodigal son - coming to his senses, returning. This idea of returning to me, as he's saying, is a gospel call to those who belong to Christ and are trusting in him. It's certainly a gospel call to the unbeliever, to those who are not trusting in Christ. It's a call in that way. Turn, turn from your sin, acknowledge what it is. You'll see that later on in the passage, but it's ultimately a call to turn to the one from whom you've turned away. It's not about doing great things for the Lord - accomplishing great things, as some people might say. It's not about any of that. It's not through religious ordinances necessarily and going through ceremonies and all of that. It's returning to someone, to the Lord, repenting and turning to him. The heart of faith has always been a relationship with God, knowing Him, and that's what he's saying. It's a call to return to the one from whom you have wandered as first in your heart. You remember Jesus would say this in the book of Revelation, in chapters two and three, as he's calling certain churches to repentance. In the church at Ephesus, He would call them to remember from where they'd fallen and to repent - recover the love they had lost at first. And so, it's a call not only for the non-believer, it is a call for that, to hear God's word, of His anger towards rebellion, hard heartedness, toward sin. It's a call to the unbeliever to acknowledge that and turn from those

things as we confessed. earlier. Turn in faith. The Lord Jesus Christ, he's the one who provides cleansing for sinners and a way back. But it is also a reminder for those who are trusting in Christ, those who are united to him. Maybe there's wandering, maybe there's discouragement and complacency. Repentance is an ongoing way of life for the believer.

The Lord Receives Those Who Return

You see the great and precious promise that's there. It is a “return to me and I will return to you.” The Lord being very quick to assure his people, to assure sinners who repent and turn that he will in fact not cast them out. He does not hold grudges. It's why we love that parable of the prodigal son so much. Because Jesus is sending, he’s telling us a message in that - look at the quickness of the Father to run to the son who has repented and come to him. And there's much joy and rejoicing in heaven. The one who was lost is found. And you see that Zechariah is saying just that. There's a Father ready and willing to receive sinners who returned to him through faith in Christ. It's why Paul would say in Romans 5:20, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” - grace that is greater than all our sin. A God who is abounding in it, who's quick to forgive. We so often find ourselves not being very quick to forgive. James would encourage us to that end, but praise God, he is one who is, who is quick - not hesitant, not holding grudges. As Richard Sibbes says, there's more mercy in Christ than sin in you. And there's an impulse, there's a reaction, you might say, but a promise here, the Lord saying, “Those who return to me, I will return to you. I will turn towards you.” He does that in the Gospel. He's turned towards sinners with forgiveness and grace. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. We'll come to the Lord’s table in a moment and be reminded of that very thing. So, there's a priority the Lord establishes and it is himself. It is himself.

II. The Pattern the Lord Rebukes

And there's secondly a pattern that Lord rebukes as we think of that idea of returning to the Lord. There's a certain pattern to renounce, a pattern the Lord rebukes in verse 4. “Do not be like your father's, to whom the former prophets cried out. Thus says the Lord of hosts, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds, but they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the Lord.” A certain pattern he's highlighting for them. Do not be like your fathers, referring to that former generation who hardened their hearts. As Psalm 95 will even say, do not harden your hearts like them. They had hardened their hearts, not listening to the word of God. Crying out to them through the prophets, this Lord of hosts, calling them to repentance and faith.

Listen to the Word with Humility

And he's saying to the current generation, don't be like that - where you stop up your ears and refuse to listen to the word of God. And as Jesus would say, take heed how you hear. Listen to the word of God with humility, that's what the Lord would have for us. Do you see how he's pointing out something of their ways as he called them and the current generation? We will reference that down in verse 6 and we'll come to that in a minute. But those ways and deeds and then verse 4, they're referred to as evil ways and evil deeds. That's why, I know we don't speak like this very often, in our confession that we said in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, section 2 as we confess earlier - the filthiness and odiousness of our sin. Sometimes

we're not honest about what sin is and what it's like and call it what it is. The Bible is very clear on these things. They're evil ways and evil deeds. And yet perhaps they might have looked rather religious. They had a temple and all of those things. They were going through perhaps the outward motions of religion and had done great things for the Lord. And yet that is not, that is not what the Lord says through Zechariah that is required. Don't be like your fathers in hardening your heart, but listen, humble yourselves as the word of God is proclaimed. Isaiah would say it this way in Isaiah 66 verse 2. “But this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” That's what the Lord looks for. It is why you see that so often in the Gospels. The Lord is saying himself, and the apostles will say it too, that the Lord came to save sinners, not the righteous, but sinners Jesus came to save. And Paul would say I am the chief of sinners and it's a trustworthy saying that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. You see the fathers that he's referring to would refuse that to say that and they were much like the Pharisees to whom Jesus referred, declaring themselves righteous, always seeking to put forth their own self-righteousness. And he was rebuking that over and over and over again. Repent, He would say, and they would refuse. That's not the kind of Messiah we had in mind. That's not the kind of savior we were looking for - one who would come and say things and address our pride. That's not the issue - our issue is the Romans. And you might say maybe in Zechariah's time, perhaps people thought, well, it's the Persians, you know, it's been the Babylonians, now the Persians and it's their fault. And the Lord is saying no. Think about your sin. Think about how you respond to the Word of God. When it rebukes, do you recoil and bristle in pride? Or do you bow humbly, saying you're right? You see, that's the pattern that the Lord rebukes - that kind of stubborn hard heartedness that says I refuse to listen to the word of God. It would be as if David perhaps, being confronted by Nathan after he had sinned and done horrendous things. The Lord sent Nathan to confront him and put his finger in David's chest as it were, and say “You are the man.” And for David to swat his hand away – “Who are you to tell the King about my sin?” No, he confessed and we have Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 that we so love and promises of how the Lord responds to that kind of confession of sin. Those who confess their evil ways and evil deeds and hear the language there again in verse 4 and pay attention to the Lord. That's what he calls for. For those who pay attention to the Lord. It's a warning, it's a pattern to be rebuked, of hardening the heart, of stopping up the ears and not listening to the word of God. Not bowing humbly, and having a contrite spirit, and trembling at the Lord's word. And so, I would put forth to us that kind of question. When I hear his word is it that I'm just simply moving a bookmark to read through my Bible? Or am I listening and paying attention to the word of God? And where does it shine its light? As David would pray in Psalm 139, shine that light in my heart and see if there's any wicked way in me, and bring it to light that I might confess it. Where does the Lord teach and rebuke and correct? There let me humble myself and say you're right, oh Lord. That's what he would have us to do - to think about that pattern, do not be like your fathers. Do not be hardened towards the word of God. But humility, humility when rebuked. I wonder when you are privately reading your Bible - perhaps this is true maybe in a family, maybe it's true in the church. How do I respond to the word of God? Is it just to come and simply feel good about myself and maybe move the bookmark and say I've read through the Bible in a year and that sort of thing? Or is it, Lord cause your word to have its way with me. Let me hear it and respond quickly. Not that I would save myself, that's not what he's calling for, but a quickness to respond to the word of God with all humility. And he's promising to be one who returns to people like that.

III. The Promise the Lord Keeps

Well, thirdly and lastly, the promise the Lord keeps. The priority the Lord establishes himself, the pattern the Lord rebukes - that stubborn hard-heartedness and deafness, you might say. But the promise the Lord keeps in verses 5 and 6.

God Keeps His Word

You see, God's word is certain. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? Of course not. No, it's a rhetorical question you might say. But my words and my statutes, did they not overtake your fathers? You see, what God promised came true. It always does. God promised and He keeps His promise. Certainly, the Lord had not forgotten them, the Lord has not forgotten anything. The Lord was not too busy. No, the Lord did what He said. And this is what they will acknowledge at the end, but it's what's going on here at the end of verse 6. So, they repented. I think he's referring to the current generation to whom Zechariah is speaking. So, they repented, not the former generation, but the ones to whom Zechariah is speaking, they repented. And the Lord rebuked them for that. When he called out their sins, when he told them of their misplaced priorities and where they had gone astray, they humbled themselves and repented. As the Lord of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us. He's done as he promised and he's right to do so. Isn't that where humility goes and what it acknowledges? The Lord is right. He's right always. He's right that I'm a sinner. He's right that I that I sin and what my sin is and what it deserves. And everything that he says is good and right and I agree with him. That's what humility looks like. It's trusting the promise, even in that way, that the Lord, the Lord keeps his promises and it's an acknowledgment of that. And so, when the Lord says that his wrath, as Jesus would say in John 3, His wrath is set upon sinners, and the only hope of refuge is to flee that wrath by trusting in Christ, God keeps that promise too. God keeps His word always. This is a pointer to that end, not merely the rebuilding of the temple in Zechariah's day, but ultimately to the Lord dwelling with his people And it's a promise to those who repent. So, they repented, it says in verse 6. Isn't that what the Lord promises to us if we confess our sins? He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.

Conclusion: Return to God Through Christ

And so, it is a call, it is a call to gospel repentance and faith and turning from sin and trusting in Christ. Yes, to the one who has never done so, to return to God through Christ and he gives full and free pardon and cleansing of sin. But it is also a call for the believer. As Martin Luther and his 95 theses, his very first one that he nailed on that door, he said "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." And it is true for those who think such a way and live in such a way. The Lord has turned to you in Christ with full forgiveness, no condemnation. And he returns in that kind of way - always, He remembers. And he returns to his repenting people full of grace and mercy and love, forever and ever, Amen.