

Lesson 3

When we ended last week, we had just started looking at the first vision in the book of Zechariah - the rider under the myrtle trees.

Zechariah 1:7-8

8 I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom; and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white.

What does Zechariah see in verse 8? He sees a red horse in front with other horses behind. The other horses are red, speckled, and white.

So how many horses does he see in total? We aren't told. Maybe there are only four horses, but maybe there are more than four horses.

And how many different colors does he see? He sees three colors: red, speckled, and white. The Septuagint indicates four colors, with two different shades of red between the red horse in front and the red horse or horses in back, but the Hebrew text does not make that distinction.

Are these the four horses of the apocalypse from Revelation 6? I think we will see that the answer is no, but for now let's just say maybe, but not necessarily.

First, as we said, Zechariah may be seeing more than four horses.

Second, a similarity of symbols (horses in Zechariah 1 and horses in Revelation 6) does not mean the objects of those symbols must be the same thing. We need to look at the context of the symbols, along with any explanations in the text.

What do the horses depict? What do the colors depict? What do the myrtle trees depict? Who is the rider on the horse? In short, **what are these?** Fortunately for us, Zechariah asks that same question in verse 9.

And if we are confused with the very first vision in the book, then isn't it comforting that Zechariah was also confused with the very first vision in the book! Zechariah is about to ask the same question we are asking. **What are these?**

Zechariah 1:9-11

9 Then said I, O my lord, what are these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will shew thee what these be. 10 And the man that stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, These are they whom the LORD hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth. 11 And they answered the angel of the LORD that stood among the myrtle trees, and said, We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.

Here, in the text itself, we have an inspired explanation of the vision, and so, according to one of our ten interpretive rules, we should pay very close attention to what is said here in this explanation. (But, of course, I think we would have known that even without an interpretive rule!) And if our interpretation disagrees with this inspired explanation, then, of course, our interpretation is wrong.

But let's hold our horses and not get ahead of ourselves. Let's proceed carefully.

- In verse 8 we see a man riding a horse.
- In verse 9 we see an angel talking with Zechariah.
- In verse 10 we see a man standing among the myrtles trees.
- In verse 11 we see the angel of the Lord standing among the myrtle trees.

What do we have here? Two men and two angels? One man and one angel? Something else?

The commentaries go crazy over this question, but I think the best answer is that the man in verse 10 is the man on the red horse in verse 8 - both are described as standing among the myrtle trees.

The angel of the Lord in verse 11 is also said to be standing among the myrtle trees, but I think that angel is most likely the same angel who is speaking with Zechariah in verse 9 because "they" are "answering" this angel in verse 11, which suggests we have heard from him before.

Before we consider what the vision means, let's look first at a question that will face us several times in this book: **Who is the Angel of the Lord in verse 11?**

Some commentators suggest that the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is a preincarnate appearance of Jesus. That is, an appearance of Jesus before the incarnation when he came into the world as a man in bodily form.

Some believe we see such an appearance in Daniel 3:25 when King Nebuchadnezzar sees a fourth person in that fiery furnace along with Daniel's three friends.

And others point to John 12:41 as evidence that Isaiah was seeing Christ on his throne in the great throne room vision of Isaiah 6.

And one thing we know with certainty is that Jesus is very concerned whenever his people are in danger. I think of the entire book of Revelation, for example, which shows Jesus' great love and concern for his church. And I think of one of my favorite verses in Acts, in which Stephen, who is just about to be stoned to death, sees Jesus:

Acts 7:56 - *And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.*

Jesus was *sitting* on his throne in Acts 2:30, but when Stephen sees him in Acts 7, Jesus is *standing*. I love that picture of Jesus standing and looking down at Stephen, getting ready to greet him in the heavenly kingdom. We know that Jesus loves his people and is very concerned about their welfare.

We also know, of course, that Jesus is not an angel because, unlike Jesus, angels are created beings (Psalm 148). Jesus is not a created being; Jesus is God. But the word "angel" in Hebrew just means "messenger," so in the sense that we can call God the Son a messenger from God the Father, we could refer to Jesus using the Hebrew word translated "angel." But, as we said, Jesus is most certainly not an angel in the way that word is ordinarily used.

Why do some think that this particular messenger of the Lord might be Jesus? Well, let's look at some other Old Testament verses that mention the Angel of the Lord.

Who appeared to Moses in the burning bush?

Exodus 3:2 - *And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.*

And also note verse 4:

Exodus 3:4 - And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, **God called unto him** out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

What did the angel of the Lord say to Hagar in Genesis 16?

Genesis 16:10 - And the angel of the Lord said unto her, **I will multiply thy seed exceedingly**, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.

And what did Hagar say in verse 13?

Genesis 16:13 - **Have I really seen God** and remained alive after seeing him?

Who stayed Abraham's hand in Genesis 22?

Genesis 22:11-12 - And **the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.** And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son **from me.**

The word "me" at the end of Genesis 22:12 is being spoken by the angel of the Lord in verse 11!

Another possibility is that this Angel of the Lord is just an ordinary angel (if any angel could ever be called ordinary!) who is acting as a spokesman for God. And so, whatever the angel is saying, it is as if God were there in person saying it himself, which would, for example, explain the pronoun "me" in Genesis 22:12.

So which view is correct? I don't think we can answer that question with certainty (at least not yet, and perhaps not ever in this life). We will see the Angel of the Lord again in Zechariah Chapter 3 and in Zechariah Chapter 12. So let's reconsider this question when we get to those verses, which I do think will provide some strong evidence for one of these two views.

Now back the vision. What do the multi-colored horses depict? Verse 10 tells us that they are those whom God has sent to patrol the earth.

What about the colors? What do they mean? We are not told, but the colors of the horses most likely

depict the varied missions of their riders. That is what the colors depict in Revelation 6. Perhaps the red colors depict fire and blood, and the white color depicts glory and victory. We can't say for sure, and perhaps the failure of the inspired explanation in verse 10 to mention the colors means that the colors are just there to paint a more vivid picture.

What about the myrtle trees that were in the bottom? The myrtle tree is a small evergreen, never growing taller than about eight feet. That they were in the bottom just means that they were in a hollow. The trees were short to begin with, and this just made them appear even shorter. If God had wanted to choose a tall, stately tree, he could have chosen a cedar or an oak, but he did not. He chose a myrtle. Remember how the great king Nebuchadnezzar was depicted in Daniel 4:11?

"The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth."

Why not choose a tree like that? Why choose a myrtle tree?

What we see with the choice of a myrtle tree is a theme that runs all throughout Zechariah, and in fact all throughout the Bible. God chooses people who appear small and insignificant from a worldly perspective, but God uses such people to accomplish his great and wonderful plans.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 - For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

I think what we are intended to see here in this opening vision are swift messengers of vengeance and victory going out to patrol the earth for the good of God's people, who, though small and weak by earthly standards, have the power of God behind them working on their behalf.

If that theme is so important, why is it relayed with such an obscure symbol? If that were the only time that message had been relayed, then that might be a good question. But it is not the only time that message has been relayed. The Bible relays that same message a hundred times in a hundred different ways! It is all throughout the Bible! In fact, at this time, Haggai was relaying that message in a manner very different from Zechariah.

What does it mean in verse 11 that "the earth sitteth still and is at rest"? It could mean that this vision occurred during a lull in the rebellions against King Darius, and history, in fact, tells us that there was a brief lull in the fighting at this time after the initial rebellions and before the Egyptian rebellion. But I think the context argues *against* that interpretation.

The verses that follow suggest that this time of peace refers to the peace that the Babylonians were experiencing in contrast to the divine judgment that had been prophesied against them. Last week we looked at one such prophecy from Isaiah 13. If we flip one chapter ahead to Isaiah 14:7, we find the same phrase that we see here in verse 11 - the whole earth is at rest, and is quiet. And those are the only two places in the Bible where that exact phrase is found.

Recall what we read earlier from Isaiah 13.

Isaiah 13:19-20 - And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.

We see a similar prophecy in Jeremiah 51.

Jeremiah 51:42-43 - The sea is come up upon Babylon: she is covered with the multitude of the waves thereof. Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby.

Those prophecies against Babylon had not yet occurred, at least not literally. Babylon received little to no punishment at the hands of Cyrus in 529 BC. It was a very peaceful takeover. The Jews may have hoped that the coming of Darius would mean that Babylon would finally get what it deserved, but that is not what happened. Darius put down the revolt and then Babylon just continued on as before.

The report about Babylon being still and at rest here in verse 11 is similar to Psalm 73:12 - "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches." Why? We ask that same question today, and the people of Zechariah's day asked that same question in 519 BC.

They were probably wondering how long it would be until God finally punished the Babylonians. And, in fact, that is the exact question we see next in verse 12. How long?

Zechariah 1:12

12 Then the angel of the LORD answered and said, O LORD of hosts, how long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?

Revelation 6:10 would later ask that same question about another great enemy of God's people - Rome.

Revelation 6:10 - And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

That verse has rightly been called the theme of the book of Revelation. Notice, however, a big difference between the question in Revelation 6:10 and the question in Zechariah 1:12.

The question in Revelation 6:10 was asked by those who had been slain for the word of God. The question in Zechariah 1:12 was asked by the Angel of the Lord. If this Angel of the Lord is a preincarnate appearance of Christ, then the question in verse 12 is directed from God the Son to God the Father.

Whether or not this Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ, we know that Jesus was caring for and loving his people long before he was born in that manger. Jesus was caring for us and loving us before the foundation of this world! Revelation 13:8 describes Jesus as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

We can't say for sure (at least not yet) whether this Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ, but it certainly deepens the meaning here for me to think that it may have been Jesus standing among those myrtle trees.

So what is the answer to the question "how long?" God's people suffered for 70 years. How long until they are finally vindicated and Babylon meets its well-deserved fate?

Zechariah 1:13

13 And the LORD answered the angel that talked with me with good words and comfortable words.

God answers the angel with good words and comfortable words. The references to "good words" reminds us of Joshua 23.

Joshua 23:14 - Not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed. [NAS]

God is faithful to his word - if God says it will happen, then it will happen. And Zechariah is not the only person who can find comfort in that fact - we can take comfort in that fact as well.

The phrase "good word" appears twice in the book of Jeremiah, both times in connection with the restoration after the exile. Jeremiah 29:10 is especially important because it refers to the promise of the end of the "seventy years," which is explicitly mentioned here in verse 12.

Jeremiah 29:10 - For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform **my good word** toward you, in causing you to return to this place.

The phrase "good word" also appears in the important promise of restoration in Jeremiah 33:14, which points toward the restoration of both royal and priestly authority in Jerusalem, something we will also see in this book.

Jeremiah 33:14 - Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will perform **that good word** which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and concerning the house of Judah. [ASV]

So what were these good and comforting words? Let's keep reading.

Zechariah 1:14-15

14 So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy. 15 And I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.

The Lord answered the angel in verse 13, and now it seems that the angel passes these same words on to Zechariah in verses 14-17. And Zechariah, in turn, is told to pass these good and comforting words on to the people.

God's good and comforting words focus first on his zealous passion for Jerusalem and for his people, and then on his great anger towards those responsible for Jerusalem's destruction and his people's exile. If the Jews thought that God had let Babylon off the hook for some reason, they were badly mistaken. God's anger against Babylon had not cooled.

By why was God angry with Babylon? Hadn't Babylon been doing what God wanted them to do? Hadn't God used Babylon to teach his people a lesson? Didn't God refer to Nebuchadnezzar as his servant in Jeremiah 27:6? Yes - but Babylon had gone too far. That is what verse 15 says.

God was a little displeased with his people, but Babylon went far beyond the level of discipline that God had wanted them to inflict. Here is how the ESV translates the verse:

"And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster."

In short, Babylon took advantage of the situation, and that is why God was very displeased with them.

The good and comforting words continue in verse 16.

Zechariah 1:16-17

16 Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem. 17 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.

In verse 3, God said, "Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you." We see that promised return here in verse 16. "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies." The people had returned to God, God had returned to Jerusalem, and the foundation of the temple had been laid.

What blessings would accompany God's return?

- His house would be built (verse 16). At the moment all they could see was the foundation, but God is telling them that they will see the completed structure.
- A line would be stretched over the city (verse 16). Not only would the temple be restored, but

the city would be restored and rebuilt. A surveyor's line would soon be used to plan the rebuilding of the city.

- God's cities would overflow with prosperity (verse 17). That is, God's blessings would spread beyond Jerusalem into the surrounding areas as well.
- God would comfort and choose Jerusalem (verse 17). Jerusalem had been chosen once before, but it had fallen from that position. God promises his people that the city will be chosen again. God's relation with Jerusalem will be renewed.

When would these blessing be realized? We will in this book, as in the other Old Testament books of prophecy, see some prophecies that would be fulfilled soon and other prophecies that would occur much later, sometimes hundreds of years later.

We know that Zechariah includes some distant prophecies because the New Testament frequently points to Zechariah as proclaiming the coming of Christ over 500 years later. Into which category do these prophecies fall? Soon or distant?

I think we are looking here at prophecies that would *soon* come to pass. Why?

First, we know that the temple was in the process of being rebuilt, and the first promised blessing is simply that it would in fact soon be finished. If that blessing would soon occur, it seems natural to understand the following three as likewise coming to pass soon.

Second, these prophecies are not out of proportion with what we would expect these people to experience. That is not the case with other prophecies both in this book as well as elsewhere, such as in Isaiah. Elsewhere we find promised blessings that are so wonderful and so far-reaching that they could only be realized in Christ and in his eternal kingdom.

In fact, Zechariah seems to deal in this book with people who were expecting all of God's promises to occur all at once. Part of the goal of this book is to teach them patience. Yes, the promises will all occur, but they will occur according to God's timeframe - some now, some later.

And what about Babylon? How long until that evil city finally got what it deserved? God does not answer that question. It seems that event, too, was something that would occur in God's own time frame.

And, one more thing about Isaiah's promised destruction of Babylon. Not only would it occur in God's own chosen *time*, but it would occur in God's own chosen *manner*.

Isaiah described Babylon's falls using vivid, apocalyptic language, and we should not take such language literally unless we are forced to do so. With Isaiah 13 the force is in the opposite direction - that is, we are forced to take the prophecy as a *figurative* description of Babylon's fall. Why? Because verse Isaiah 13:20 says that the city would never be inhabited; that no Arab would pitch his tent there. That has not *literally* happened even to this very day.

A dispensationalist would tell you that the only thing that could keep people from pitching their tents in Babylon would be a nuclear bomb - and that is exactly what they say is being prophesied by Isaiah, and by reference here as well. But does that make any sense at all? Do we really think God answers the question "how long" by promising to nuke a completely different group of people living thousands of years later? A little common sense goes a long way in understanding the Bible.

I think what we have in Isaiah is a figurative description of the judgment of Babylon from God's perspective. Perhaps, some in Zechariah's day had misinterpreted Isaiah and expected Babylon's destruction to literally occur in that manner - but if so, then they had something in common with modern premillennialists; they had misinterpreted figurative language in the Bible.

Let's look next at Zechariah's second vision: the vision of the four horns.

Zechariah 1:18-19

18 Then lifted I up mine eyes, and saw, and behold four horns. 19 And I said unto the angel that talked with me, What be these? And he answered me, These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

The word "horn" can mean several things in Hebrew. It often refers to the horns of an animal, such as on a ram, goat, sheep, or ox. It can also refer to the tusks of an elephant. The word "horn" can also refer to things constructed from such animal horns, such as a trumpet or a container for liquids.

The horn is an animal's offensive weapon, and so horns in the Bible usually depict strength and power.

Amos 6:13 - Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?

Jeremiah 48:25 - The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is broken, saith the LORD.

Daniel 8:3 - Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last.

Those two horns in Daniel 8 were the kings of Media and Persia.

The difficulty with verses 18-19 is not determining the meaning of the horns. The difficulty is identifying four powers that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

Another difficulty is determining what is meant by Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem. On the surface that list sounds simple enough, but why is Jerusalem the city listed along with the nation (Judah) that contains it? And why is Israel mentioned long after it was carried off by Assyria in 722 BC?

One possibility is that we should look back over time for four powers that have harmed Judah (the southern tribes), Israel (the northern tribes), and Jerusalem (the royal city). If that is the case, then the four powers would likely be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. (Although Persia had been more of a friend than a foe.)

Another possibility is that Israel is being used here as a name of honor for Judah. It is used that way elsewhere in the Bible after the northern tribes were carried off.

2 Chronicles 23:2 - And they went about in Judah, and gathered the Levites out of all the cities of Judah, **and the chief of the fathers of Israel**, and they came to Jerusalem.

This view also finds support in verse 21, which mentions only Judah as having been scattered. If that is the case, then the number four is most likely being used here figuratively (which, you recall, should be our default position for apocalyptic language).

What is the symbolic meaning of the number four? Four is the symbolic number of the earth - four cardinal directions, four seasons, four elements. If that symbol is being used that way here, then these four horns represent all of the earthly powers that are arrayed against the people of God - and in my view that is the best option.

Some commentaries suggest we should be looking for **two** world powers rather than four world powers - why do they say that? They say that if we have four horns, that means we have two animals,

and so we should look for two worldly powers. This does fit well historically - Babylon and Assyria scattered Judah and Israel. But there is a problem here, or two problems, actually.

The vision does not mention the number two, and the vision does not mention any animals connected to the horns. We should not take a vision involving four horns and turn it into a vision involving two animals. That would violate one of our interpretative rules - we should not add symbols to the text that are not present in the text.

#Zechariah