

Scripture: Zechariah 7: ~~4-10~~ 4-10.

Topic: Our God-Given Moral Code.

Text: Zech. 7:9---"Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, ~~ye~~ do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart".

Proposition: In spite of particularism in some of its parts, the Bible book of Zechariah presents a still-present message of God, that justice and righteousness toward all people is demanded by God of men of faith.

Sources: Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 6, pages 1053-1057.

Other sources, of illustrations, noted in typescript.

Date written: March 20, 1965

Dates and places used:

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### Introduction:

1. President Lyndon B. Johnson has been quoted as saying, recently, "If you wish a sheltered and uneventful life, you are living in the wrong generation". There are some of us who will give serious thought to such a statement because the president of our country said it, or because we voted for him. Others will immediately discount a statement simply because somebody they didn't choose said it. But this particular statement has quite a bit of thought-provoking truth in it, regardless of who said it. "If you wish a sheltered and uneventful life, you are living in the wrong generation".

2. Zechariah, the person after whom the book of Scripture was named from which we read today, and about whose message and visions the book tells, was saying something similar to President Johnson's statement, but to a generation of more than 2400 years ago. ~~As~~ the statement of our president brings to mind the tremendous scientific advances of the day, the achievements of those who probe in the field of space exploration, the lengthening of life expectancy,

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2. Rechariah, the person after whom the book of Rechariah was named from which we read today, and about whose message and visions the book tells, was saying something similar to President Johnson's statement, but to a generation of more than 2000 years ago. For the statement of our president brings to mind the tremendous scientific advances of the day, the achievements of those who probe in the field of space exploration, the legendary life expectancy,

the new and exciting forms of transportation and communication being developed; but it also reminds us of the great ideological camps into which the world is divided, because of which a very real threat exists that the whole human race may be annihilated. Zechariah's messages reminded the people of his day of conditions which existed ~~in the~~ <sup>then</sup> ~~day~~, and told them the significance of these things too. Zechariah's messages had some truth which is rather important for us today. We can best get this truth as we come to know something of the conditions and times for which he spoke. We seek here to become familiar with the book of Zechariah, as we have it in the English translations called The King James and the Revised Standard versions, and through understanding to lift out of it for our consideration truth which is God-given and eternal.

I. The times and person of Zechariah, the prophet, tell us much about the reasons for his writings.

1. Zechariah's father was, according to a passage in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah (12:4), the head of

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I. The times and person of Nehru.  
 The prophet tells us much about the  
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1. Nehru's father was, accord-  
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 book of Nehemiah (2:1), the head of

a priestly family which had returned voluntarily from exile in Babylon as soon as they were allowed ~~to~~ (but not forced) to return to Jerusalem. Because a son usually followed his father's profession, particularly if that father was a priest, it is often assumed that Zechariah was a priest as well as a prophet. His book gives no proof of this, one way or the other.

2. Zechariah's prophetic career began in the eighth month of the second year of the reign of Darius I, which we know to be 520 B.C., and ceased in the ninth month of the fourth year of the king's reign, or in 518 B.C.. His career as a **prophet**, therefore, was a short one; but longer than that of his contemporary prophet, Haggai. The historical background of his book is the same as that for Haggai, since they lived at the same time. For both, the rebuilding of the temple is a main theme. Part of Zechariah shows us that the temple was not completed yet. The hard conditions of life are mentioned in both books. The absence of war, and the quiet desperation of a poor people, are revealed in both. The high hopes which Haggai had that the king Zerubbabel was the

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long-awaited messiah who would restore Israel as a strong and God-fearing kingdom, are also held by Zechariah. Zechariah believed firmly that the messianic age, when Israel would rule the world for God, was near.

3. Passages in Zechariah show that the prophet felt that the Lord, Yahweh, revealed himself directly to him, as to earlier prophets. And yet, he obviously thinks of himself as not quite of the high company of earlier prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. For Zechariah, God is still far off from man. Instead of God speaking directly to him, then, he <sup>usually</sup> has visions through which God is revealed. Also, instead of interpreting the visions himself, an angel usually interprets to him the meaning of a vision. For Zechariah, God has been enthroned high beyond the reach of man, far off in the heavens.

4. Zechariah was a prophet called to give his message to a people whose hearts and minds were heavy and sluggish with discouragement. These he must incite to action, much as a president or other leader must stir people to do something more than just sit and wait. The community at

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Jerusalem, to which Zechariah preached, was composed mainly of a few young men and a few men in middle life who had been brave and idealistic enough to give up jobs and property in the foreign country of exile so as to return to Jerusalem, from which their ancestors 70 years before had been removed to assure that the country would not revolt against the empire of Babylon. These returnees were finding it no easy task to live happily and to carry on the work of reconstruction. The work of rebuilding the temple and the city seemed slow and not very worthwhile. Disillusionment gripped the little company in Jerusalem.

5. George Adam Smith has said, "The prophet's duty is to quiet the people's apprehensions about the state of the world, to provoke their zeal, give them confidence in their great men, and, above all, assure them that God is returned to them and their sin is pardoned".

(Smith, The Book of the Twelve Prophets rev.ed., N.Y., Harper, 1928, II, 258). To understand how he did it is to be familiar with

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### III. The messages of Zechariah as shown in his book.

1. The book of Zechariah has 14 chapters. The first 8 are thought by most full-time Bible scholars to have been written by the man, or prophet, Zechariah. The other 6, chapters 9-14 are thought to have been written by at least 3 other writers, and probably 150 to 250 years later than the first part. Both parts have as their most important message something of the same thought, however.

2. Chapters 1-8, the first part, is usually studied in 3 sections, into which it seems to fall. The first section is made up of the first 6 verses of the book, and is of an introductory character, being a call to the people to repent and to return to God. The second section, 1:7-6:15, consists in the main of a series of 8 visions, together with their interpretations. Their is the vision of the four horsemen who have traveled to all parts of the world. The angel interprets this to mean that the rest of the world has displeased God, so he will return his favor to Jerusalem and it will be rebuilt. Then follows

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a vision of four horns and four smiths signifying that the horns that had oppressed Israel were to be overcome, as blacksmiths <sup>can</sup> beat metal <sup>horns</sup> from one shape into another. There was a vision of a man with a measuring line measuring Jerusalem, but the angel said that Jerusalem would not be measured but would be so great that its people would be numberless. There is a vision in which the prophet sees a seven-branched candlestand, representing the seven eyes of the Lord who sees all and knows all and gives full justice, symbolized by the olive trees which represent God's power and justice. These and the other visions all bring out the point that under God the holy city of Jerusalem shall be restored, and shall become the center from which God will rule the world. In other words, to a people who have lost hope and enthusiasm, the visions of Zechariah bring hope and faith that things will be better, that God is with them.

The third section of the first 8 chapters is 7:1-8:28, is that from which comes our Scripture of today. In response to an inquiry put to him by a deputation from Bethel concerning the keeping of ~~the law~~ a traditional

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fast, he replies that their fasting has little spiritual value, and that they must learn to practice the moral virtues. Part of his answer to them is our text here: (7:9) .."Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother".

3. Chapters 9-14 of Zechariah do not even mention the prophet's name. Perhaps they were added much later to the book by some unknown compiler to make sure they would get read. At first reading they seem to have much material that is difficult and obscure. There is much in them that is inhuman and savage, that is mostly narrow nationalism, that puts holiness as purely physical acts and not spiritual. Consider this for inhuman action, even though they thought God approved it:

"The Lord of hosts will protect them,

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altar".(9:14).

This bloody, flesh-eating, blood-drinking group are the people of God cannibalizing their enemies. We cannot accept this as godly conduct.

Consider this for narrow nationalism "And if any of the families of the earth do not go up ~~and~~ to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain upon them".(14:17). In other words, God prevails only for those who worship him in Jerusalem. That we cannot accept.

4. In spite of such things as this, the early Christians found much of value in this second part of Zechariah. They saw in 9:9 words which said to them that Jesus, who wrote into Jerusalem on an ass, was the long-hoped for Messiah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!" Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt and the foal of an ass".

And in ~~verse 7~~ <sup>obscure</sup> they saw the forecast of the crucifixion:

"So I became the shepherd of the

... (2:11) ...  
 This body, flesh-and-blood,  
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flock doomed to be slain for those who trafficked in the sheep." (11:7).

The early christians saw in Zechariah 14:16 words which assured them that their conviction was right that through Christ, who worked in Jerusalem, should all be saved:

"Then every one that survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the feasts of the booths." (14:16). That is, all who will accept may now worship the Lord of Jerusalem, who is the Lord of the earth, regardless of whether or not they are Jews.

5. Zechariah is a book which speaks so much in terms which are different ~~to~~ and foreign from the ways that we ~~speak~~ today that we rather ignore it, and usually do. Yet, it does have something to say to us, in spite of all its obscure and hard-to-understand visions and prophecies.

III. The timeless messages of Zechariah are what we are chiefly interested in. Most of us find this Biblical history and quotations that we've been doing a bit dull. But in them

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are timeless messages.

1. One is that no matter how hopeless things are, there is good reason for hope. Translated into our times, we might say that no matter how threatening the world situation, the world and life on it will not be completely destroyed. Human reason and concern will prevail under God, so that life will not be annihilated. Mankind will not get progressively worse, but, rather, under God people are improving. This would be the message of ~~xxx~~ hope for our times, interpreted to our conditions, which Zechariah indicates.

2. Further, not only is the world not going to be destroyed, but people in it will be getting better and turning to God. They tell us nowadays that the "religious boom" of the first 15 years after World War II is over. We are finding it harder to get people to make commitments to Christ and church. On the other hand, the commitments that are being made seem more deep, the people more committed to action and service. Our feeling is that things are not getting worse, but better. We're being more honest.

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The necessity that even dictatorial and communistic powers phrase their appeal to people in terms of peace and prosperity and justice are indications that these christian and godly standards are recognized by mankind. Sure, the dictators and the communists are using these terms as bait, and they don't <sup>mean</sup> need them, but the masses of mankind are convinced that our christian standards and goals for mankind are what count. The world is getting better, really, and mankind with it. Our newspapers are proclaimers of doom and gloom, but they reflect only the unusual. When evil and bad is unusual, and is news, then the good is so usual that it is not news. This is part of the evidence that the message of Zechariah is true for our times too, that the world and its people is turning to God. Gradually, perhaps, but still going in that direction.

3. As a part of this improvement, all of us have been given standards by which to guide our lives. These standards are God-given. They deal with how we treat those around us. Zechariah heard God say, and passed it along to posterity: "Thus says

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it alike to posterity: "These say"

the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart".

4. Here is a pretty good moral code. "True judgments!..not jumping to conclusions about others, or judging harshly. "kindness and mercy"...being able to forgive a lot which you may not understand and approve, and still respect and treat one as a person. Most of us would treat well the widow and the fatherless, but not necessarily the sojourner, the stranger in our midst, the tourist going through, the newcomer to the community. As for devising "evil against his brother in your heart", most of us do this at times. Its hard to be sincere. To tell a person one thing and to tell somebody just the opposite about him and your relationship to him-- this is "evil in your heart".

5. Jesus purified, summarized and exemplified the God-given moral code, but much that he brought together

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was originally in the prophecies and other passages of The Old Testament. There is a God-given moral code.

Conclusion:

1. It was one of those warm days that can happen in late February. The old timer was asked, "Do you think Spring has arrived?" "Nope," he grunted, "it's just winter backing up to get a fresh start!" (Quote, 3/14/65, p.18).

2. The message of Zechariah is good for us today ~~too~~, for it talks about a "backing up" which is helpful. We can back up from gloom and discouragement and wrong, and turn to God. Then it is that permanent respect for and allegiance to a God-given moral code will help bring springtime into human relationships.

3. This is brought about because we recognize that ~~there~~ justice and righteousness toward all people is demanded by God.

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