

Rev Donald Macdonald: Zechariah 5:1-7

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read, prophecy of Zechariah chapter 5, reading again at verse 1.

Again I lifted my eyes and saw, un behold a flying scroll, and then again I went further down at verse 7, un behold the leaden cover was lifted and there was a woman sitting in a basket.

And I'd like to look at these two things, a flying scroll, a woman sitting in the basket. Now when you read the writings of the book of Zechariah, perhaps one of the first things that may strike you in reading this book is that it is a somewhat unusual book in the Bible.

And particularly in these earlier chapters of the book, speaks of unusual experiences in the life of this man Zechariah.

And many of these unusual experiences are bound up with visions that are given to the Prophet. You know, if you are prone to dream, you may see some very strange things in your dreams, which have very little bearing on reality.

[1 : 47] And there are times when you wake up, when you are extremely glad, that it was just a dream. In fact, I have to say that this morning before I woke up, I had a dream in which I saw someone in this congregation.

And also I was asking this man about his dad, and his dad is no longer in this world.

It was a kind of strange dream. He was travelling in a car, and I was asking him about his dad, but it was just a dream. Anyway, that's by the way.

However, this man Zechariah, he had unusual visions, and they had a very direct bearing, what was taking place during his own lifetime, and far beyond.

This was a man who saw coloured horses, a flying squirrel, a woman stuffed in a basket. He also saw in his visions some very familiar figures, men who were critical to the life of the returning exiles, who had come from Babylon after 70 years of exile.

[3 : 10] Chapter 3 speaks of Joshua, the High Priest. Chapter 4 speaks of Zerubbaba, the civic leader who was of royal descent, and was the governor of the returnees from exile.

And these visions that he speaks of in this book, they took place in one night. It wasn't a series of visions over a period of time, but a series of visions that took place in one night.

There are, or there were, eight visions in total. And this evening we are looking at, that's visions 6 and 7. And these, if you like, are the more unusual among the visions that Zechariah saw.

A flying squirrel and a woman stuffed in a basket. Now remember, although Zechariah calls the people to repentance, he is sent to God's people to minister a word of encouragement and reassurance.

God, through the prophet Zechariah, summons the people to persevere in the great work of rebuilding the shattered walls of the city of Jerusalem, and particularly to engage again in the rebuilding of the temple.

[4 : 49] This man was preaching to a people who had taken their blessings at one stage for granted. And now they are facing extremely challenging times.

We learn from Haggai, a contemporary of Zechariah, and probably an older man than Zechariah, but they prophesied about the same time.

And you find in the book of Haggai, therefore says, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. You have sown much and harvested little. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.

They were being exhorted to have an inner change. They were exhorted to repentance. And these are exhortations, you might be saying, what relevance do these prophets have for our day?

Well, their exhortations are still very relevant in our day and in our generation, just as surely as they were then. And here we are told how God responds to the situation that prevailed, and in these

visions he gives insights to a servant Zechariah into the purposes and the power of God.

[6 : 09] He shows some things that look familiar and teaches them heavenly lessons. And so in this vision, or these two visions, we have, as I said, the most unusual sights.

What might we understand from these unusual visions? Remember the people of God? They have suffered God's judgment on them as a nation, sent into exile.

Now that they have finally returned, or their descendants have returned, life has become really hard. They're surrounded by hostile forces. Thamman is a real possibility. And yet, all of that hardship, notwithstanding, here in chapter 5, Zechariah comes to the people and the Lord gives to Zechariah for the people two very sobering visions that articulate God's response to the people's sin.

The Lord's relentless confrontation of His people over their sin actually reflects His loving commitment to pursuing their eternal welfare.

If I can put it this way, when you were a child, and your parent, you were disciplined by your parents, you probably resented it.

[7 : 44] You probably thought that sometimes they perhaps even hated you for disciplining you in the way that they did, but they did it out of love.

They did it in order that you might differentiate between right and wrong. And God is acting like this with regard to His people here. He loves them.

He knows, as one of the Puritans, John Owen famously put it once, if we're not always killing sin, sin will be killing us.

What's remembering and reflecting on that? If we're not killing sin, sin will be killing us. He knows that sin does not sleep. It does not stop. It's like a festering soul, and it will destroy us in the end unless we take action.

And our circumstances, however difficult or trying, they may be, must never be allowed to become an excuse. For as it were backing away from the work that is given to us of mortifying the flesh and fleeing to God for mercy, cannot allow self-pity to paralyze us in the pursuit of holiness. And so God here confronts his people with a very powerful rebuke of their remaining corruptions, even in the midst of their ongoing trials.

[9 : 26] Well, the flying scroll. Seheriah sees a flying scroll, but in itself, you know, ought to make you reflect on this unusual, isn't it? A flying scroll.

It's not on a table. It's not in a storage jar where you might expect to find a scroll. It's not in someone's hands for reading, because that's what they're used for reading in those days, but it's suspended in the air.

A flying scroll. Now, in the Old Testament scriptures and in the prophets, a scroll, sometimes spelt, come in judgments.

For example, in the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapter two, you find Ezekiel sees a picture of a scroll, a vision of a scroll bearing words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me and behold, a scroll of a book was in it and he spread it before me. That written on the front and the back and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. But here's a flying scroll. And what I think draws my attention, possibly yours, apart from the fact that it is a flying scroll, is the size of the scroll.

[10 : 50] Notice the precise detail that is provided of the measurement of this scroll. And there must surely be a reason for this detail to be included. In verse two of the chapter we read, we are told that it is 20 cubits in length and 10 cubits in width.

Now a cubit from your elbow to your fingertips, approximately 18 inches. That makes this scroll 30 feet long and 20 feet wide.

Now try to visualize in your mind what is in effect something like a huge banner suspended in the air 30 by 15. I don't think you would have used a banner as large as that to advertise the show that you had last week.

Although you might have wished to have one that large. But it's a huge banner and it's suspended in the air 30 by 15.

No. I suppose the nearest I can think of it is, you know how sometimes light aircraft are used in advertising. And you see them on these light aircraft and they tow huge banners behind them when people wish to advertise something very publicly.

[12 : 25] That's the closest I can suggest to this banner that is, to this scroll that is suspended in the air 30 by 15.

And the message on it is very clear. It's writing on both sides. Not something that they could avoid. No. Is there any significance in the measurements that are given to us? And I would suggest that there is.

You may remember from your Bible knowledge that there are two areas in the temple that have exactly the same measurements. The vestibule front of the name of the house was 20 cubits long equal to the width of the house and 10 cubits deep in front of the house.

The vestibule or the porch of the Solomon temple. That's the one that was destroyed and at the time of Zechariah that they were seeking to rebuild.

What significance can be attached to that? Well, I think it's safe to assume that Zechariah already knew what was revealed in scripture.

[13 : 33] He would know of this porch area that was in the former temple, an area where the people of God were brought to hear God's judgments expressed.

But what I think is more significant is that these measurements are the measurements of the holy place in the temple.

Remember the temple at two particular rooms? The holy place where the priests were in and out on a daily basis. And the most holy place where the high priest only went in once per year. The holy place the priests served. That's where God communicated with man on a daily basis.

Therefore, it seems to me that this scroll bearing God's law and reflecting the dimensions of the holy place reminds us that what determines sin, if we were in any doubt, is God's revelation.

God's assessment. It is not we who decide what is right or wrong. You know, what was wrong yesterday is tolerated today and approved tomorrow.

[14 : 49] And when we move away from the law as it is taught in the scriptures and a basis and a foundation for our law as it was, then you see how many things become distorted.

And that has happened with regard to many laws and practices in our country at the present hour. The word sin is not something that is used much in today's vocabulary.

Our laws are frequently decided and framed by legislators who are influenced by sociologists and psychologists.

And as theories and tests change, so do our moral codes. And this vision sets before us not that it is God who determines what is right or wrong. That is our standard.

Not the standard that we may like to set or the standard that proves attractive to the mind of man, to the sinful heart of man, but the standard that is set by God in his infallible truth.

[16 : 02] And we ignore that at our peril. And it seems to me that these standards have been eroded hugely in our country and it leaves me greatly worried.

So that God's standards are not based, not on our studies or the trends or the claims to progress and enlightenment, but they are based on the holy character of God as revealed in his law.

He has fixed the dimensions of sin and righteousness. He has revealed these to us. And they are as unchanging and unchangeable as God himself.

Whatever the message is, there's no way that we can remain ignorant of it. The people of Israel then in Zechariah's day couldn't say that they didn't know or they didn't see.

Like the tablets of stone that had the Ten Commandments, this scroll is written on both sides, on one side there is written a representative commandment of that part of God's law that deals with our relationship to one another.

[17 : 19] And on the other side, a representative commandment that deals with our relationship to God. And in a symbolic way, what is clear is that this sets before us the holiness of God, because the law of God is but an expression of the character of God.

Look at the explanation of the angel in verse 3. Here is the message that is written large on this huge banner. This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land for everyone who steals shall be cleaned out according to what is on one side.

Everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other side. And you see, there are two commandments there that are spoken of.

The third commandment and the eighth commandment. The eighth commandment you shall not steal. The third commandment you shall not swear falsely or so on.

And the word for curse here is virtually a technical term in the Hebrew Scriptures for a judgment incurred for the transgression of a covenant.

[18 : 34] It's the word we sound particularly for the consequences of transgressing the Mosaic covenant. In the closing chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, we are told of the great issues of life and death.

Where if there is disobedience and disregard for the covenantal promises, God says, the curses written in the book will be upon him and the Lord will brought out his name from under heaven. And the two sins that are particularly highlighted here represent from discretion, as I said, of the eighth commandment and the third commandment.

Theft and swearing falsely by the name of the Lord. Taking his name in vain. Third commandment represents the first table of the law, our duty toward God.

What it looks like for us to be rightly related to the Creator. Third commandment, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain.

[19 : 50] Falsely swearing involved the use of God's name with falsely entering into a solemn commitment with no intention of keeping it.

And the usual formula was, as the Lord lives. That would be the formula of be used. But then they had no intention of keeping it. They had no respect for the truth.

And the eighth commandment represents the second table of the law, our duty towards our neighbour. Many commentators, they actually highlight, and this is how they describe it, the mercantile character of the sins that are involved here.

In other words, there were sins that arose out of the prevailing economic situation. That is what is particularly being denounced. They were prostituting themselves to the love of the glory of the world and the worship of Mammon.

They were turning Jerusalem into Babylon, and you know how the New Testament says, we cannot serve God and Mammon of God and money. As far as I can tell, the formal practice of pagan idolatry that had been such a part of Israel's sin prior to the exile, and the primary reason that they were sent into exile was formal idolatry.

[21 : 26] It's not quite so prominent in the day of Zechariah. The people have returned to the worship of the Lord alone.

And that was the only worship that had a regular place in the life of the people of God after the exile. But there were other sins that were very prominent, lying and invoking God's name to make a quick pound or two.

Stealing by means of unjust weights and measures in the marketplace. And somehow they were blind to these things.

In other words, they were using unjust weights and measures when they were selling or when they were buying.

Yes, they had made progress in one area. Formal pagan idolatry was not practiced. The great besetting sin that had sent them into exile in the first place is no longer so prevalent.

[22 : 42] And yet there remains a great deal of progress to be made. They are still shocking blind spots in their lives.

Inconsistencies that are still to be addressed, deeper idolatries that have yet to be forsaken. And so far from allowing Israel a moment of self-congratulation for having come so far, it's as if the Lord is bearing down relentlessly on their hearts to deal with their deeper idols.

In those areas where they've been given themselves some kind of leeway, some kind of free pass to practice these issues.

And so the warning is written large on a banner in the sky that they are to take note of this. Now, who of us hand on heart can say this evening that even if we have dealt with obvious idols, sometimes I'm not sure that we have.

But who of us can say that we have not swapped them for more subtle, deeper false gods of material and personal advancement?

[23 : 59] It's a devastating rebuke on the life of Israel or of the people of Israel at this particular stage.

And the flying scroll makes it plain that their sin will be discovered. It shall enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by my name.

And it shall remain in the house and consummate both timber and stones. Now, what does that remind you of? Does it not remind you of? Does it not have overtones of how God passed through Egypt on the night that the firstborn in every house died where there was no blood on the doorposts and on the linker?

The scroll, if you like, is like to use a modern analogy. It's like a heat-seeking missile. You know how the armed forces today are so advanced they can use heat-seeking missiles.

They can use it to home in on aircraft or on ships. And here the scroll is as it were, honing in on every transgressor and every transgression.

[25 : 22] And the wise man in the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us God will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

In other words, we can run but we can't hide. The judgment of God cannot be escaped and the judgment that is promised matches the offense perfectly.

To those for whom material prosperity and its pursuit, the Trump's personal integrity, the Lord will strike at the very heart of their material comforts.

The curse will consume the very things we pursue and come to live and come to live for. It shall remain in his house and consume at both timber and stone and I think that that stresses the thoroughness of divine judgment.

When it is exercised there are no half-measures when God asks. The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.

[26 : 33] Now, notice what the scroll is getting at. It's getting at dishonest practices on the part of those who had returned to Jerusalem.

Dishonest practices in the marketplace, dishonest practices in the economic life of the people, dishonest practices in their work.

Now, you can take that forward into the 21st century. Have dishonest practices, have they been removed in the 21st century? Not on your right. They are still there. Dishonest practices in the workplace. Dishonest practices at a very local level.

Just to give one example, and now I'm going back to the time of my first career.

And in my first career I had a lot of contact with people who were weavers. A lot of contact because I was paying those who were working on the loom.

[27 : 45] And in some areas there were people working the loom who weren't earning it honestly with their feet. They were putting a mechanism onto the loom in order to make their tweets quicker.

That's just one example. Now, that's been back a long time. I don't know if that practice still prevails, but it did a way back in those days.

And that's the kind of thing that has been gotten at here. You know, sometimes we accept things as the norm in order to make profit and advantage for ourselves. And the Lord is here saying through the prophet, these things are wrong. You want to earn it in an honest way. Not doing things dishonestly.

Not using different measures. You could do it if you were a shopkeeper, using measures that were not correct.

And giving people light weights rather than giving them the correct measure when they came into a shop. And so on. You can multiply the examples. And these are the kind of things that he's getting at here.

[29 : 06] In other words, he's saying those who are prepared to sacrifice holiness for happiness will find that pursuing happiness without holiness will eat away at us so that we attain neither in the end. That's the curse of sin.

Well, that's the first vision. The second vision is this, the woman sitting in the basket. And this is perhaps, well to me, in a way, it's the most intriguing and the strangest of all the visions that Zechariah saw.

And the impression you get is that Zechariah has seen this initially at a distance. And it's not quite sure what it is. Lift your eyes, says the angel, and see what is that that is going out.

And says Zechariah, I said, what is it? And he sees a basket. In essence, it's a bushel container. Probably something like a barrel in shape. It would have a capacity of somewhere around five gallons.

[30 : 16] And this again is symbolic of the way in which the people had slipped into sin. The fact that it was often used in trading and in the marketplace reinforces again the point that the besetting

sins of the community at this point in their lives are primarily economic in character. Their desire for gain and worldly prosperity had come to dominate their way of life at the expense of being honest and upright in their dealings with one another.

They were prepared to defraud others. They were prepared to defraud the laborers of their legitimate wages to advance themselves.

They wouldn't give the laborer what was the proper going rate. And given the context of this basket, I would be inclined towards a larger basket than the north.

And usually this particular basket is fitted, and usually rather this basket is fitted with a heavy lead covering.

And the image takes a more sort of, even stranger twist when Zechariah sees a woman crouching inside the basket.

[31 : 53] The woman's name we are told is wickedness, the symbol of the wickedness of God's people.

Now you might be saying that women here may be bristling and saying, well why is it a woman? Are they more sinful than the men? Why is it not a man? And not a woman?

Well it's nothing to do with gender, and it's not discrimination of any kind against women. Please take that on board. The only reason that it's a woman here that is turned because the Hebrew word for wickedness happens to be feminine and foreign.

And so the symbol is naturally enough a woman. But perhaps there's another reason too. You see, now that they've returned to Jerusalem, they've found a far more pernicious and deceptive idol to enslave them.

They've become worshipers at the altar of materialism and personal profit. And look what happens in verse 8. He thrust her back into the basket, thrust down the leaden weight on its opening.

[33 : 17] And the verbs that are used there in the original, they're indicative of a physical and forceful struggle. He thrust her back down.

In other words, the impression created is that there's a struggle going on here. The person controlling the lead and the symbol of wickedness want into escape out of the basket.

And the point we're meant to grasp is, I believe, that this symbol of wickedness wants to be free, to deceive the people at will.

She wants to prosecute her campaign of disseminating idolatry amongst the people as they pursue the selfish and self-centered ends without restraint and without impediment of any kind.

But she's thrust down and covered over. Her deceit is restrained. Her enslaving power is contained. In other words, the Lord will not allow wickedness free reign. And that's good news.

[34 : 28] Because this is another side of the response of God to the sin of his people. Yes, there's a word of rebuke. But how thankful we should be for the other side of this picture, that God doesn't simply stand aloof to condemn and to rebuke sin.

He also acts to contain sin. He doesn't simply denounce our sin and he graciously restrains it. And Sakhanayah's vision here, I think, reminds us of what is surely one of the most overlooked mercies of God's grace in our lives.

Many of us battle, pure a Christian, with besetting sin on a daily basis. And the fight isn't easy, is it? You're fighting and you're struggling against a besetting sin.

Sometimes you lose the struggle. Sometimes you stumble and you fall. And when you do, as often as not, you're overwhelmed by guilt, aren't you?

The vice of self-recrimination. It's there. Your conscience relentlessly condemns you.

[35 : 50] And in the middle of that experience it is remarkably easy to forget that God has already been restraining, graciously restraining sin in your life.

So although you've stumbled and fallen and struggled and battled, things are not as black as they could have been had God not been in the equation, working through His Word and Spirit to restrain wickedness, because sin doesn't have free reign.

Praise God, that it's true. Wickedness is not free to ensnare and deceive us however she wills, because God is in sovereign control.

And that knowledge ought to reassure the believer in the fight, so that even although you might lose a skirmish with temptation, yet you need to remember it's the Lord. It's the Lord and not the symbol of wickedness who has ultimate dominion over your life.

Sin, however malevolent and mighty it may appear, is not the ruling power and the hearts of those who have trusted in Christ alone for salvation.

[37 : 23] And so you have the picture here of sin covered. And it suggests a little more too. It suggests how sin is banished.

For notice it's taken to a place outwith the community. It's taken to a place called Shiner. Now Shiner is another name for Babylon. Shiner refers to the place where opposition to God and His cause is located.

You remember the Tower of Babel, a way back in Genesis chapter 11. That's what Shiner stands for, rebellion against God.

And this basket is taken to Shiner and placed on a stand in a temple there. And I think the messages are a very sobering one.

If God in the Gospel acts to restrain and to remove the sin of His people, He also acts in judgment to hand the world over to sin.

[38 : 41] And I think that's the point that Paul reinforces very forcefully in Romans chapter 1 and following. Versating down. God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

And worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever. God gave them up. He handed them over. Wickedness is sent to a place where she belongs and the temple is built for her there.

She's placed on an idle stand that she might be worshiped. But God rescues his people from their sin. He hands a rebel world over to their sin. God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

He gave them up to debased minds. That's the way that judgment usually works this side of eternity. It's not immediately catastrophic and sudden. It's typically slow.

And it's the typically slow and steady abandonment of your mind and your body to the idols you have chosen for yourself till they consume you.

[40 : 03] Never delivering the pleasure or the satisfaction that they promised you. Stead they leave you empty, constantly lost in form of and never filled.

And that's very solemn. To reflect on how God might be handing you over.

And the most chilling thing of all about that reality is this, in my view. No one ever notices when it happens to them. They just go deeper and deeper and deeper into the morass of sin.

How is sin banished entirely in the life of the believer? Was it not? And is it not? By another becoming banished at Calvary.

One who was rejected by earth and rejected by heaven. Abandoned.

[41 : 32] See, experience the bitterness of the curse. There was no word of comfort heard in the darkness of Calvary.

There was no author of assistance in the darkness of Calvary. Prompt in the cry of dereliction. My God, my God, why?

He was made sin. For us? The heavy burden much more than that of a lad, lid.

The overwhelming weight of the guilt of our sin was laid on him. Here he is, the righteous, in the place of the unrighteous.

And you remember how Paul summarizes it so eloquently, right into the Galatians, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

[42 : 39] How by becoming a curse for us, not the cross. The condemnation announced by Zechariah's scroll.

Engulfed Christ. So that instead sinners like you and me might be enveloped in the gracious loving mercy of God in Christ.

It is Jesus who is the Lamb of God, as John the Baptist put it, who takes away the sin of the world. It's Christ who appeared in order to take away our sins.

And if tonight you are united to Christ through faith in His name, then He has taken us in a way. As far as the West, the East is from the West. So far does He remove our transgression from us.

That's what God does in His infinite mercy and grace. You can go East as far as you want. You'll never say you've met the West. Go West as far as you like. You'll never say you've met the East.

[44 : 04] Can you say tonight that Christ has borne your sin? Can you say tonight that He has died in your place?

You know, at Calvary there were two thieves on the cross. One was converted at the 11th hour and one was not.

But there was another thief present at Calvary. His name was Barabbas. I don't know if Barabbas was in the crowd, but I like to think that he was.

I don't know if Barabbas ever realized what had taken place. But literally Barabbas could say the one on the center cross has died in my home and place.

Because that's where he was meant to be. Remember, Pilate gave the option, who shall I set free? Christ or Barabbas. And you remember, set Barabbas free was the cry of the mob.

[45 : 20] Crucify Christ. Barabbas could say, He in my place. Or can you say tonight that Christ has died in your place?

That He has taken your place. Because if He has, then He has borne your sin. But if you can't, if you can't, how do you expect to deal with the weight of the guilt of your sin?

The Bible doesn't prescribe any other way, apart from through Christ. All my friend.

I don't know how long you've been coming to this building. Perhaps some of you have been coming for the whole of your life. You've come perhaps to an age where the eternal realm is much nearer from the day of your birth.

Have you become reconciled to God through Christ? Let us pray. Eternal one we would ask thy blessing on your own truth. For it is your word, O Grant.

[46 : 53] Grant that it, that we hear it as the word of God. Forbid that it fall on deaf ears. And be dismissed from heart and mind. And the glory shall be thine. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.