**The Great Work of the Lord – Part 1**

Text: Zechariah 12:1-9

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**Scriptures:** Zechariah 12:1-13:6; Revelation 19:11-16

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 15 of 19 [part 1 (part 2 is designed for an evening sermon the same day but could be read on a consecutive Lord’s Day). Part 1 has one sermon point, part 2 has two points.]

**Theme:** The final war at the end of this age

**FCF:** We can be anxious and fearful of the future yet to come

**Proposition:** Do not fear, but have certain hope, because Christ is the conquering King

**Introduction**

We have come to the last section of the book of Zechariah. The word of the Lord comes to the prophet in a series of future predictions through chapters 12-14. The focus here is on the ‘Day of the Lord’- a phrase which occurs 16 times in these last three chapters: 9 times in our text.

How did you feel as you heard the words of our text? Did the ‘lights go on’ and you thought, I know exactly what this part of the Bible is about! Or, more likely you thought: what is going on here?

How is Jerusalem going to be a rock which will cause injury to those who try and move it? Why are the horses and riders mad with panic? Why are the clans of Israel weeping like Hadad Rimmon? Why are the prophets not wearing hairy clothes anymore?

This morning as we open up this text, we’ll need to focus on the **main message** and ask the question “Overall, what is this all about”. Understanding that all the Scriptures point to Christ, we want to see how these words written some 2,500 ago help us to understand the person and work of our Lord Jesus better so that our love for Him increases. We also want to ask what difference this part of the Bible makes to how we live our lives for Christ.

It will help us to know that the type of writing we have before us today is called ‘apocalyptic’. This word comes from the Greek ‘apokalypsis’ which means ‘revelation’. As is the case with chapter 4 and following in the book of ‘Revelation’, these writings reveal the work of God at the close of this age. Sometimes referred to as the ‘end times’.

The term ‘Day of the Lord’ gives us a **big clue** that we are looking at apocalyptic writings which picture future realities in terms of images and symbols which would have been familiar to the original readers. Things like sieges, horses, and flaming torches.

The ‘Day of the Lord’ in the Old Testament pointed to the time when God would judge the wickedness of the Gentile nations (e.g. Babylon Isa 13:6; Jer 46:10) as well as those of Israel (e.g. Amos). It’s going to help us grasp the meaning of these prophecies to know that the same phrase “The Day of the Lord’ is used in the New Testament to refer to the second coming of Christ (2 Thess 2:2).

You can see right away from the first verse that this prophetic oracle concerns ‘Israel’. A question we’ll aim to answer in the second part of this 2-part sermon is whether ‘Israel’ here refers exclusively to Jewish people descended by bloodline from Abraham **or** to all Christians who are the spiritual offspring of Abraham, being heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:29).

The **biggest key** to what this passage (in fact what the whole Bible) is all about is in the first verse: “*This is the word of the LORD concerning Israel. The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him*”

These words before us today revealed to the people back then what God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the One who gives life to us all, was going to do. Ultimately it is all about Him. His glory and His work. You can see this right through our passage: v2 “I am going to make Jerusalem a cup”, v4 “I will strike”, v6 “I will make”, v7 “The LORD will save”, v8 “The LORD will shield”, v10 “I will pour”, v13:1 “A fountain will be opened”, v13:2 “I will remove from the land”

You or I might say something like “*tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money*" (James 4:13), or next week I’m going on holiday, next year changing jobs… But you and I do not even know what will happen tomorrow. In fact, we can’t even be sure about the next nanosecond!

Here is a wonderful truth. God is not like us in this. He **does know** what will happen in the future; not only because He exists outside of the time which He has created, but also because He is in complete control of everything which takes place. Speaking of a small sparrow, Jesus said “*not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father*” (Matt 10:29).

These words from Zechariah are God’s Word. Breathed out by the Creator of the Universe, the Giver of life, the God who made promises to Abraham, making a covenant agreement with Him to bless all the families of the earth. These words predict the future and we can be certain that what they foretell will come to pass.

We are going to look at God’s work as revealed in our text under three headings which really form a single sermon spanning two worship services. Our three points are:

1. The Great War (this sermon)
2. The Great Grief (part 2)
3. The Great Grace (part 2)
4. **The Great War (external deliverance)**

Douglas MacArthur, US 5-star General who had a prominent role in the Pacific during WW2, said a number of memorable lines in his lifetime including: ‘*Old soldiers never die; they just fade away.’ ‘It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it.’ ‘Age wrinkles the body. Quitting wrinkles the soul.’* He also said: “*Men since the beginning of time have sought peace…but war is man’s chief legacy*”

He is right. Wars fill the histories of ancient cultures: e.g. Syrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Phoenician. The 27-year long Peloponnesian war destroyed Greece as a world power (431–404 BC). For the Romans, warfare was a way of life until the empire was finally defeated by the barbarians. War ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages, culminating in the 30-year war which ended in 1648. WW1 20 million killed (1914-1918). WW1 was called the ‘war to end all wars’ yet 21 years later… WW2 commenced 60 million killed (1939-1945).

Now in the 21st century, conflicts continue to abound. Some suggest that in light of the current crisis in Syria and/or North Korea, WW3 may be imminent. The prospects for peace in the middle east seem distant…tensions are high in Europe; the US has advised that citizens are not necessarily safe if they travel beyond national borders.

Perhaps in NZ we are far enough away? Yet our flag is one of 60 on an ISIS website identifying us as part of "The global coalition against the Islamic State”.

In a fallen world, war is never far away….

In the first part of our text for this morning, the **final war** which will be fought on the earth is described in military images familiar to the people of Zechariah’s day. This will truly be the **war-to-end-all-wars**. It is being fought against Jerusalem, Judah is also besieged (v2). All the nations of the earth are effectively gathered into a single attacking army. You might think that the forces against Israel are so overwhelming that defeat is inevitable, as it was when the Babylonians took the city in 587BC. However, it is because the Lord acts for Israel, that the outcome is final victory on behalf of God’s people.

The Lord promises to make Jerusalem a cup which will send the nations reeling. The cup here is a symbol of God’s wrath from which the nations will drink (Is 51:17; Jer 25:15-17, 27-29; Eze 23:32-34). The idea is that just as a person who drinks intoxicating liquor to excess staggers around, being disoriented in a shameful condition and often becoming injured, so the nations will become likewise weak, confused and helpless under the judgement of God.

Once I hired a digger and at the end of the day saw what looked like a small rock in a hill paddock. So I started digging, but once it was uncovered I saw that the rock was actually huge. Eventually it rolled out against the digger, knocked the machine over and went off down the hill. I was fortunate to escape injury.

Similarly, the attacking forces try to dislodge Jerusalem, but the Lord will make her immovable and the enemies of his people will injure (literally lacerate/cut/gash) themselves. Just like I almost did with that large rock. The power of the nations will be removed, symbolized in their war horses becoming panic stricken, blind and mad. These covenant curses of Deut 28:28 now afflict the enemy.

Judah and Jerusalem appear separately in this oracle; but together they oppose the attacking nations. The leaders in Judah see that the people of Jerusalem are strong because the LORD Almighty is their God’. The Lord makes them ‘like a firepot in a woodpile, like a flaming torch among sheaves’. Fiery torches were commonly used in ancient warfare. Remember Samson putting torches between the tails of foxes and sending them into the standing grain of the Philistines (Judges 15:4-5). Modern armies might use napalm or other incendiary devices for similar devastating effect.

Notice that the offensive capability of Israel comes from the Lord as does their defence. “On that day the LORD will shield those who live in Jerusalem” (v8). Everyone will be like David, a ‘man after God’s own heart’, strong warriors, but more… they will be ‘like God’. They will be without sin. They will be led into battle by the Angel of the LORD.

Does this text describe some future war in the Middle East? Is Jerusalem going to become the central focus point for World War 3, or 4, or 5…? No. This text is **not about** a physical city. These verses portray future spiritual realities in physical terms. Remember that this is apocalyptic literature, like most of the book of Revelation. As is always the case when we are seeking to rightly understand the meaning of the Bible, Scripture interprets Scripture.

Jerusalem and Judah are here symbolic of God’s people, the spiritual descendants of Abraham who are opposed by the unbelieving world in which they yet live. The book of Hebrews identifies the ‘city’ in which the church already dwells as being the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’: **Hebrews 12:22-24** (*But) you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

The final war is a war of the unbelieving nations against God’s people, the church. It is a war which has been raging in a sense since Cain murdered Abel. In these verses the final battle is depicted as taking place at the end of this age on the Day of the Lord, which we know from the New Testament is when Christ will return. Revelation 16:16 reveals God’s wrath is poured out on the earth and a final battle involving ‘the kings of the whole world’ taking place at a place called ‘Armageddon’ (Rev 16:16).

“Armageddon” in Hebrew literally means ‘mount of Megiddo’. Megiddo was a key strategic city overlooking the main route of travel between Egypt to the south and Mesopotamia to the north. It was the level plain where good King Josiah was mortally wounded in battle with Necho king of Egypt at a place called Hadad Rimmon in the valley of Megiddo (2 Chron 35:20-24). When Josiah died, we read that “*all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him*” (2 Chron 35:24). This great grief over Josiah’s death in battle is expressed in the sorrow over ‘him whom they have pierced’ in v11 – more of that in part 2! In the Great War, at Armageddon, God is at work **recreating** a world in which will be inhabited **only** by those who dwell in Judah and Jerusalem. Only those who are spiritual descendants of Abraham will be present. If you took a census in this new Jerusalem, 100% of the population would rightly tick the religion box as being ‘Christian’.

There are only two forces at war in the final battle and they reflect the two sides which exist in the world today: Those who follow King Jesus and those who do not. Jesus said: "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters*” (Luke 11:23) Congregation, we proclaim Christ to a lost world, modelling and proclaiming his love, kindness, gentleness, compassion and invitation to come to Him. Brothers and Sisters **there is an urgency** in our call “*To make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour, who joyfully serve and glorify God”*

Why the urgency? because God, who knows and controls the future, says: **Zechariah 12:9** “*On that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem”.* On that day, Christ will come in visible triumph. Jesus Christ, the One who died at Calvary and rose again will return to this earth. As pictured in the symbolic, apocalyptic writings of Revelation, He will come on a white war horse. He comes to conquer and to judge. He is followed by the ‘armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen’. We might think of angels here, but Rev 17:14 reveals that those who are with the Lord of Lords and King of Kings are ‘called the chosen and faithful’.

That includes us, faithful believers in the Reformed Church of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. We will follow King Jesus into the war to end all wars. A war which He has already won at Calvary when he died to take your place and mine, conquering sin and death once for all his people.

Knowing this future with certainty **makes a difference** to how we are called to live now: There is much cause for fear and anxiety in our lives is there not? Will Islam continue to expand across the globe? Will ISIS infiltrate our country with suicide bombers? Will the church crumble in this nation of New Zealand in which many see belief in a supernatural deity as being pitiful, primitive and even quite dangerous?

We cannot answer these questions with any certainty, but it is true that: We will not see world peace before Christ returns. We will not see the church in complete peace before Jesus comes back. Your heart and mine will not be completely at rest until we are with our Saviour who has conquered all for us! Jesus said before going to conquer in death on the cross “*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world!*” (John 16:33)

Take heart congregation. The day of the Lord is coming when our God “*will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem*”. On that day perfect righteous justice will come with Christ. Then we will be able to inhabit our eternal home, the New Jerusalem. Until then the battle continues, not as a physical Jihadist unholy war, but as an essentially spiritual battle as described in Eph 6:12. ‘*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’*

As we continue to fight this war, remember that: “The people of Jerusalem are strong, because the LORD Almighty is their God” (v5). Or to put this into NT terms: “The people of the church of are strong, because Christ is their conquering King”. Brothers and Sisters in our Lord, we have nothing to fear and everything to hope for.

AMEN