**Returning to Compassion**

Text: Zechariah 1:7-17

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**Scriptures:** Zechariah 1:7-17; Revelation 21:10-18

*Suggested song of response: STTL234 Comfort, comfort ye my people*

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 2 of 19 – First night vision

**Theme:** The Lord Almighty returns to his people to promise abundant future prosperity and peace

**Fallen Condition Focus (FCF):** We struggle with the yet-to-be-fully-realised covenant blessings which God has promised to us

**Proposition:** Be encouraged, Our God has returned to us in Christ and will return again!

**Introduction**

We come now to 8 nocturnal visions which Zechariah had, possibly during a single night. God speaks to people in various ways (Heb 1:1b) throughout Scripture (directly, through angels, even a talking donkey!), but also through dreams (e.g. Joseph, Daniel) and visions (e.g. Isaiah, Nahum). It is not possible to define the difference between a dream and a vision; at times in Scripture these phenomena seem almost identical. Here in the first six chapters of Zechariah, the word of the Lord comes to his prophet by a series of visions which form a structured set of interconnected revelations. The pattern is called a 'chiasm' and is used both in Greek epic poetry (e.g. Iliad, Odyssey) and Hebrew poetry. As we'll see the 1st and 8th visions fit together, as do the 2nd and 7th, the 3rd and 6th and finally the 4th and 5th, bringing the climax not at the end, as we are most familiar with, but in the middle.

In our text, it is now 3 months after the word of the Lord first came to Zechariah, 5 months after temple building started. As we heard last week, to begin with there was a dark word of warning- v4 with a command to 'turn around' v3b. We saw that ongoing repentance was the foundation for the rebuilding of the broken-down temple in Jerusalem in 520BC. Further that this repentance was expressed by accepting that what had happened in their painful history as a people was what their ways and practices deserved, a determined judgement from the Lord Almighty.

As we applied this message to our situation 2500 years later, after the finished work of Christ, we saw that we have not received what we deserve, either as individuals or as a church. The penalty for our sins came upon Jesus, God's righteous anger was poured out on Him. Whilst we may have suffered troubles and conflicts as a church over the years, we are called to collectively repent of our past sins and declare (v6b) “'The LORD Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.'"”

Do you ever have strange dreams as you sleep? When you awake you can remember imaginary images, puzzling pictures, and you wonder where these came from and what they might mean? Zechariah’s first vision presents a strange scene, let’s have a look…

1. **The strange scene** – the army of the Lord (1:7-11)

The vision opens and there is a rider with his red horse. He is in front of three more groups of horses, red, brown and white (in the original Hebrew the words for red, brown and white are in the plural indicating more than one horse of each colour). We can assume that they also had riders. Horses in the Ancient Near East were used for military purposes. Here then was an army of cavalry in a small valley/ravine/hollow/little glen in which myrtle trees were growing. The word 'tree' here is a little misleading, as the myrtle only grows to about 2.4m in height; the same elevation as the ceiling in many NZ homes. It's really a shrub and was often used by OT Israelites in making temporary shelters in the fields during the feast of tabernacles/booths (Lev 23:40; Neh 8:15).

If you count them up you'll see that there are three individuals referred to in the vision, apart from the prophet Zechariah who wants to know what this all means and asks the question "what are these my Lord?" (v9a).

Firstly, there is the man who rides the first red horse, who is standing among the shrubbery (v8,10).

Then there is the 'angel who was speaking/talking with me'. This is a phrase which re-occurs in most of the following visions. You can see this in our text in verses 9 and 14.

Finally, there is 'the angel of the Lord' who is reported to in verse 11 and speaks to the Lord Almighty in verse 12.

So who exactly are these beings?

Look with me at verse 11 and we can see that the red horse rider standing amongst the myrtle trees is the 'angel of the Lord'. The first time this being appears in Scripture is in Gen 16:7 when he instructs Hagar to return to Sarah, promising that she will have a child who will be named Ishmael. The Scripture says that *“She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."”.* Here and elsewhere (e.g. in the burning bush Ex 3:2) the angel is identified as being God himself. Yet in other places we see the angel of the Lord clearly distinguished from God, either because God speaks to him (e.g. 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:18,27) or he speaks to God as here in v12. So, given that the angel of the Lord is divine and yet also separate from God, it makes sense that this angel is a pre-incarnation appearance of the second Person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ. The 'man' standing in front is the leader of this army of angels. As the angel of the Lord, he represents the very presence of God in power.

The being who was talking with Zechariah in the vision is another angel who interprets the visions for the prophet. So we have two particular angels in the vision and the implication is that the riders of the other horses gathered are also angelic beings. Our word ‘angel’ is derived from the Greek ‘angelos’ which means ‘messenger’. The Hebrew word for angel has the same meaning. The name then describes the function we see here in our text, that of being a heavenly messenger, who delivers a communication from God to human beings.

We need to be careful when seeking to make interpretations of the content of visions like this. It is tempting to assign meaning to details which may only be there as 'background' to the main message and which by themselves have no special significance. For example, the colours of the horses (red, brown and white) do not appear to convey anything in particular.

However, when it comes to the little valley with small myrtle shrubs growing, it is possible that these details are incidental, however it is worth considering the following as a possible interpretation. The geographical description would fit the Kidron valley, outside Jerusalem and the myrtle trees reflect the characteristics of the remnant of the people who had returned to rebuild the temple. They too were small (not tall and strong like the cedars of Lebanon) and they were not yet dwelling in the splendour of Jerusalem, but were in a disheartened, lowered state outside the city walls. The use of myrtle trees as temporary shelter during the feast of booths also links them to OT Israel. There is some conjecture here, we cannot be absolutely certain. However, if the myrtle trees do represent the discouraged returned exiles then the vision is of the LORD Almighty - literally the Lord of hosts coming amongst his small people outside of the yet-to-be-rebuilt temple. It is then a powerful picture of the Lord's strength and sovereign power in the midst of His people, to whom He has returned - because they listened to His voice, repented and turned back to Him.

If the myrtle trees were not intended to be connected with Israel in the minds of those who first heard these words, then at least we can say God had returned to His people and was speaking to them through the prophet Zechariah. He was neither distant nor silent nor lacking in power. He was with His people, communicating with them as their Almighty Lord.

If you had been labouring to rebuild the temple in the face of opposition, with your paddocks overgrown, rubble all around you and haunting memories of the "good old days" when everything was so much bigger, brighter and better, when life was peaceful. Do you think you'd be encouraged that God had returned in power in your midst, even before you finished constructing the temple? You would!

Congregation, this vision reminds us that the Lord is with us as we are gathered together, a small assembly, but one who have turned to the Lord in repentance and faith. This vision reminds us of the strength of our God and the presence of Christ with His church through His Spirit who dwells amongst us, just as the angel of the Lord stood among the myrtle trees.

We can also see from this vision that God's army of angels was at work in the world. Having been sent out over the whole globe, they returned and reported back to their commander in chief, the angel of the Lord and said (v11b) "we have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace".

Remember that this was 520BC, the Persian empire under Cyrus the Great had rapidly overthrown the Babylonian empire 19 years earlier (at the battle of Opis). Through their policy of resettling displaced conquered peoples back in their own land, with their own religion and customs, Persia had brought peace to a vast realm which covered many of the inhabited regions of the earth. Surely peace throughout the world was a good thing. It King Cyrus himself who had issued the edict of return for the exiles as the Lord moved his heart to further God’s good plans for His people. The prophet Isaiah says that Cyrus was God's anointed instrument to subdue nations, disarming their power (Isaiah 45:1).

So what was the problem? Had peace not come to the earth? Well, yes and no…

2. **The unexpected question** – How long? (1:12)

As the angel of the Lord speaks to the Lord Almighty Himself, you'd almost expect Him to say in military language something like "*All quiet on the eastern front Sir, and the western front, and the northern front AND the southern front. Sir, could I recommend that you stand most of your angelic army down for a while, we really just need a small crew now for routine peace-keeping activities."*

Sounds like good news for the globe. Good news for God's people. Peace on earth. What more could you wish for?

But look! instead of expressing relief and joy at finding the world at peace see what the angel of the Lord says in verse 12 "*Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah which you have been angry with these seventy years*". This world peace is not a good thing at all, it causes the mighty angel to lament, to cry out with anguished pleading "how long?". What is going on here?

Politically and militarily, the vast Persian Empire was at peace, but Jerusalem and Judah did not experience blessing. They were a small remnant of the pre-captivity Israelites who, whilst they were back in their own land, were subject to a foreign power who could do with them as they pleased. This was so far from the promise of God after the wilderness wanderings (Deut 12:10) "*But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you*".

This peace was not rest under the rule of God's appointed king, David or Solomon, but under the mighty rule of a vast Kingdom which was not the Lord's. Every man did not sit calmly under his own vine and fig tree. Jerusalem would have looked like the city of Christchurch a few years ago in the aftermath of devastating earthquakes, rubble everywhere, a mountain of work to do, slow progress, much discouragement and heartache.

The angel wants to know when the Lord's intense righteous anger against his rebel people will be used up. When would justice turn to mercy? When will the fearful wrath of God’s anger be spent. It had already been 67 years from the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 587BC until this vision in 520BC. 67 has been 'rounded up' to 'seventy years' by the angel; in the Bible, seventy often represents perfect completion, here a period of judgement on Israel.

On what basis does the angel of the Lord ask, “how long?” It was not as though the people who returned were without fault now. Remember that Ezra led the people to confess their sin of marrying outside the covenant community (9:1-10:17) and the prophet Haggai had called the people to stop serving themselves and to focus on building the Lord’s house (1:1-11).

The cry for God to again be merciful with His wayward people is not based on their worthiness, but on His enduring covenant promises. For example, Hosea 2:19-20 “*I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD”.* Jeremiah 31:33 *"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people”.*

Here also is a pattern for us as we cry out to the Lord in prayer, as we see in many psalms. *“My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?”* (Psalm 6:3) *“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1) Return, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.* (Psalm 90:13)

How long O Lord, until the rebellion in our own hearts stops? How long O Lord, until we see you gather into this church the broken, wounded, and weary from the community in which we live? How long O Lord, until those who have strayed from you, might return?

Now in this 1st night vision, we hear the Lord’s response.

3. **The compassionate reply** - The Lord speaks (1:13-17)

Now the Lord Himself speaks, not to the angel of the Lord, but to the angel who is interpreting the vision for Zechariah. Clearly these words are for the small group of returned exiles. They are gentle words, bringing God’s peace to the trouble souls of his discouraged people.

Notice the tone of God’s response in v 13: 'kind and comforting words’. The sense here is of speech which is pleasant, agreeable, good to hear (Heb: Tov), they are words of compassion (Heb: Naham). This is the opposite end of the spectrum, the range, from ‘very angry’ in v2.

In our text we hear three parts to the Lord's kind and compassionate reply to the "how long?" question:

1. ‘*I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion’*. Husbands, how would you feel if another man you’re your wife out for an intimate dinner and she was willing to go? Anger. Jealousy? These are closely related. Here the Lord expresses his intense devotion and loyalty towards His people because he has entered into a covenant with them to be their God. Here the terms Jerusalem and Zion are synonymous, both referring to the people of God.
2. “I *am very angry with the nations that feel secure’*. Now the world is at peace, but the nations had gone too far in trying to destroy Israel. God speaks to the Babylonians this way in Isaiah 47:6 “I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance; I gave them into your hand, and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke”. Here the intense anger of God falls on the nations who have been merciless.

Think of the police capturing an armed offender, he is sentenced to prison for his crimes, but whilst inside the guards sanction a violent attack on the man. This goes too far, it is not justice, but rather another crime which now needs to be brought before a judge.

The exiles had lost their homes (and were not covered by any human insurance policies!), most never saw their country again and they had suffered humiliation at the hands of hostile powers who now enjoyed the peace and prosperity of an empire built on conquered territory. How do you feel about those who have grossly profited from events like the Christchurch earthquakes? Landlords charged exorbitant rents. Start-up building companies bought all their employees new utes. Sales of $300,000 Maserati cars increased over the post-earthquake years when so many had suffered the hardship of being displaced from their homes.

The Lord was angry with those who had gone beyond their role and exploited the vulnerable. He has a heart towards those who have suffered loss (his care for orphans, widows is frequently mentioned in Scripture), so he speaks now about His people:

1. “*I will return to Jerusalem with mercy and there my house will be rebuilt*”. Now that the people have returned to Him in repentance, He will return to them in power! God's righteous wrath had burnt itself out in the seventy years of exile; but his faithful love endures forever.

The 'measuring line' in v16 is a symbol of restoration. Like seeing surveyors with laser levels on the empty lots in Christchurch from which damaged buildings have been removed. We see the same imagery relating to the building of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:5 *“The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls”.*

In v17 the word again (Heb odth) appears 4 times: Literally ‘**Again** proclaim; thus says the Lord of Armies, will my cities will **again** overflow with goodness, the Lord will **again** have compassion on Zion, and choose **again** Jerusalem’

The Lord has returned to His people, they have listened and obeyed His voice. The future looks very hopeful, the promises are big. God is extending compassionate grace to His people, small and discouraged though they are.

Yet, whilst these visions encouraged the people and the temple rebuild was completed 5 years later in 515BC and was dedicated to the Lord with great joy (Ezra 6:14-16), national Israel was never again as strong as she had been under King Solomon, the cities were never again as prosperous as they had been back then, occupation by foreign forces continued.

For God’s people back then, there was a greater fulfilment of the promise of prosperity with the rebuilding of Jerusalem yet to come. God had returned to give strength, but He was yet to come again.

For us today, we are 2500 years further on in the history of God’s dealings with this world. We live at a time when the Kingdom of God has come but is yet to be fully realized. Our God has turned to us in Christ with kindness and compassion. When we reflect upon the many blessings of the Lord which we see in this church we see evidence of His work in our midst. Indications that as we have turned to the Lord in our weakness, He has turned to us in His strength.

The future is bigger than the present building up of this local church. There is a prosperous future where the peace of the Lord’s Kingdom will truly cover the earth and all God’s people will be completely comforted. Then the old order of things will have passed away and the New Jerusalem will be built by God and it will shine with the glorious light of Christ the Lamb, who was slain, but lives forever

Brothers and sisters be encouraged by this message from the Lord through his prophet Zechariah! Our God has returned to us in Christ and will return again!

AMEN