**Our Wickedness is Taken Away**

Text: Zechariah 5:5-11

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Zechariah 5:5-11; Revelation 7:9-14

*Suggested song of response: STTL273 ‘A purple robe’*

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 5 of 19. 7th night vision

**Theme**: God’s complete removal of wickedness from the covenant community

**FCF**: We tend not to see the need to eradicate sin from our own hearts

**Proposition**: The only way to finally deal with evil is to eradicate it completely

**Introduction**

Our family has had the privilege of living in the country for much of our lives. We’ve enjoyed being on the land, having sheep, cattle, pigs and chickens, but there are some creatures which we have not appreciated: rats and mice. They can make a mess inside a house and also do a lot of damage.

You can trap and poison these vermin, but unless you get them all, they tend to keep on breeding! The only way to finally deal with a rodent problem is to complete eradicate the rats and mice. The same principle applies to sin within God’s people; to wickedness within the church as we will see from our text.

This is the 7th vision. Remember that Zechariah’s eight night visions are arranged in a structure called a ‘chiasm’ where the climax comes, not at the end, but in the middle. We’ve already seen the connection between the 1st and 8th visions, today we’ll see those between the 2nd and 7th, and, God willing, in future sermons we’ll see the links between the 3rd and 6th and then finally the 4th and 5th.

We’ve seen that the throwing down of world powers which are hostile to God by skilled craftsmen pointed forward to the conquest of Jesus Christ over sin and death. As we celebrate Lord’s Supper we remember and rejoice in the truth that Satan is a defeated foe.

This 7th vision opens with the image of a measuring basket. The word in Hebrew is an ephah – a relatively small measure for grain estimated to be about 40 litres in volume or approximately half to two-thirds of a bushel. The ephah was used to measure flour, barley or other grains (e.g. Lev 6:13; Ruth 2:17; Isa 5:10).

The interpreting angel explains to Zechariah what the basket means “*This is the iniquity of the people throughout the* land”. The ‘land’ here refers to the dwelling place of God’s people, not to the entire earth. The measuring basket symbolically contains the entire quantity of sin of the covenant people.

This iniquity[[1]](#footnote-1) is represented in the vision by a woman who is described as being “wickedness”. She is kept firmly inside the basket by a heavy lead cover. The word in Hebrew (kakar) is literally a talent – a weight measure of about 34 kg. This is a substantial restraint which keeps the woman trapped like the mythical genie in an Aladdin’s lamp. The language of the phrase ‘*pushed her back into the basket and pushed the lead cover down over its mouth’* is strong, having the sense of being forcibly thrust/pushed/cast back into captivity in the basket. The vision clearly shows that wickedness is well contained and that there is no danger of it escaping again to pollute the land.

There is no detailed description of the contents of the basket, apart from identifying the woman as representing wickedness (v8). This is a broad term (risah) covering all kinds of sin against God and fellow mankind. It is possible that the references to the ephah and the talent may point to unjust business dealings where false weights and measures were used by sellers to cheat buyers by giving them less than they had paid for. Before the exile prophets such as Amos (8:4-6) and Micah (6:10-11) had brought God’s word of judgement against dishonest commercial transactions.

Today, sadly, we know that some professing Christians in churches such as ours cheat the IRD, being willing to do “cash jobs” to avoid GST and income tax. Some deal dishonestly with their time, billing more hours than they actually spend working. Others do not provide the full quantity and quality of materials quoted for. This kind of evil was happening in the covenant community of which Zechariah was a part.

Why is wickedness portrayed as a woman in this vision? Were women more evil than men back then? No, certainly not. However, there may be a connection here to the idolatrous image of a female deity like Asherah, or to the foreign wives which men from the covenant community had married (ref. Ezra 9, and Neh 13:23-27), or to the Hebrew words for ‘wickedness’ which is feminine in gender.

Just as in the book of Proverbs, where one women represents evil (immoral adultery) and another woman wisdom, so in this vision, a woman personifies wickedness and two women are seen as God’s appointed agents. These two flying females have wings like those of stork and they lift the basket up into the air. The reference to storks points to the size of their wings and also reflects the pattern of these large birds migrating northwards (the direction of Babylon) from Palestine each year. Stork (khasihah) is a similar sounding word in Hebrew to God’s own faithfulness (Khasid), so there may also be a link here to the fulfilment of God’s covenant promises to cleanse his people from their sin.

These airborne women have the ‘wind in their wings’ as they carry the basket and its contents away. The wind here indicates motion driven by God Himself (cf. Psalm 18:10). **It is the Lord who is taking away all the wickedness of His people from in their midst.**

The basket of wickedness is lifted up between heaven and earth and taken to “the country of Babylon”. This is the land of Shinar, modern day Iraq, the ancient location of Mesopotamia where Nimrod once ruled over the cities of Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh (Gen 10:10). This is the place where the tower of Babel was constructed as a symbol of the arrogant pride of mankind (Gen 11:4). The builders back then had said “*Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth*”.

It is to this place of Shinar that symbolically God causes all the wickedness of his people to be taken. Then a house is to be constructed to contain the basket of evil. The idea here is of a permanent place where wickedness will forever remain. This then is the very opposite of a rebuilt temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. It is to be a house to hold the sin of God’s people in the very place where the tower in Babel once stood in defiant rebellion against the Lord.

This 7th night vision confirmed to the covenant community that God Himself would take their all wickedness away and keep it far from them, never to return. This was to be an encouragement to them as they laboured to reconstruct the temple in Jerusalem.

The builders struggled in their work because of the opposition from hostile forces, strong ‘horns’ of power who wanted to see their efforts come to nothing (e.g. Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites, and men of Ashdod – Nehemiah 4). The 2nd night vision gave assurance that these powers would be brought down.

For Jerusalem to be rebuilt, there needed to be complete removal of the hostile ‘horns’ which worked to scatter the people so that they would not be able to worship the Lord together. We’ve seen how the Lord showed in the 2nd vision that he would terrify these enemies and render them powerless.

The builders also struggled because of their own sin. Battles continued to rage within their own hearts. Although 43,360 Israelites had left the relative comforts of exile in Babylon to return to their ravished land, they were easily tempted to stray from their task. Their focus had been on their own houses, not on the temple (Hag 1:4), they had entered into marriages with people from outside the covenant community (Ezra 9). Some of the wealth ones were selling their brothers in the Lord as slaves to Gentiles and lending money and grain to those who had less and charging them interest (Neh 5).

For Jerusalem to be rebuilt, there also needed to be a complete removal of the wickedness which still remained in the midst of the people themselves. Like a house infested with rats and mice, complete eradication was the only answer. Wickedness in the church had to be sealed up and sent far far away never to return - so that the people of God would be clean, holy and perfect as their Lord is perfect, holy and absolutely pure.

This was not really new information. The covenant people of old knew that sin needed to be taken away if God was to their God and they were to be His people. The Lord had given them a ritual of worship on the annual Day of Atonement when the priest would lay his hands on the head of a goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites. He would then send this “scapegoat” away into the wilderness, far away from the dwelling place of the people. This was to picture the merciful grace of God; who not only forgives sins but removes them completely out of sight. He chooses never to remember them again, removing them far from us; as far as the east is from the west (Ps 103:12); hurling all our iniquities into the depths of the sea (Mi 7:19).

Now Zechariah was not prophesying the coming of two flying women who would carry a basket to the land we now know as Iraq! This was a night vision which pointed forward to the work of the Jesus Christ. Zechariah was one man in a long line of prophets. The last one before Jesus was John the Baptist. He identified the One who fulfilled the role of the scapegoat. He was also the One who was represented by the two-winged women in this vision. When John saw Jesus coming towards him, he said “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”.

As we celebrate Lord’s Supper we remember that Jesus Christ is the ‘scapegoat’. He is the One upon whom God has laid all the sins of His people. “*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus took the place of the woman who represented the wickedness of the people. As she was held fast in the basket by a heavy lead cover, so Christ was held fast on the cross. Not by nails, but by His desire to be obedient to the will of His father.

So why? you may ask. Why is there still wickedness within me, even as I sit here listening to these words? Why has Jesus not completely removed my sin from me? Why is evil still a hostile force within my very being? Why do I not do what I want to do for the Lord, but I do what I hate to do? (Romans 7:15). Why do I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out (Romans 7:18)? Why do I keep on doing the evil I do not want to do? (Romans 7:19)

Why do we often struggle with simple commands, like some of the ones we read in Romans 12: For example, you might say:

Why do I find being patient in affliction so difficult? (v12)

Why am I not more faithful in my prayer life? (v12)

Why do I so seldom bless those who cause me such difficulty and pain in my life? (v14)

Why do I not strive more actively to live at peace with everyone else I know in my family, my church, my workplace, and the wider world I live in, as much as it depends on me? (v18)

Why am I at times overcome by evil in my heart, rather than overcoming evil with good (v21)

Beloved congregation, God does not expel/eradicate wickedness from us in a single act of removal. He does it gradually, carefully and progressively as we live for Christ. If we cooperate with the work of God’s Spirit, He enables us to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Romans 8:13) and He then produces in us the fruits of holiness: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

As we come to the Lord’s Supper table, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. We proclaim that Christ, by His Spirit nourishes our souls, enabling us more and more to die to ourselves and to live for him. We confess together that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

We believe, Brothers and Sisters, that by God’s abundant grace we are part of the great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe people and language who will one day come out from this life of trouble and trial (Rev 7:9). Those who will, one day, no longer battle against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. These are those who will no longer struggle with wickedness within, for it will be removed from us forever. As with an infestation of rats and mice, the only way to finally deal with evil is to eradicate it completely. This God has promised to do.

On that day, when Christ returns, Brothers and Sisters, we will have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb, never to sin again, all our wickedness having been taken away forever.

AMEN. Come Lord Jesus.

1. Iniquity is the Hebrew word for ‘eyes’. This could be a textual variant from the similar word ‘guilt’ or could have the meaning that the image of the woman to follow is their likeness (i.e. she looks as they are – wicked covenant breakers) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)