

June 28, 2026

A CALL TO REPENTANCE FROM OUR GRACIOUS GOD

Zechariah 1:1-6

*(1 of 10 in a series through Zechariah)*

“The Castaway” is a poem written by William Cowper, author of the song we sang earlier—“There Is a Fountain.” It’s a poem that is almost hard to read. It’s about a man who was cast overboard a ship in the midst of rough waters. Though an expert swimmer, he can only sustain himself for so long, so he yells for his mates onboard the ship, but they can do nothing. They must focus on saving their own lives, attempting to outrun the storm. So he eventually realizes that he is doomed to die, alone. Cowper wrote, “Nor, cruel as it seem’d could he their haste himself condemn, aware that flight, in such a sea, alone could rescue them; yet bitter felt it still to die, deserted, and his friends so nigh.”

What makes the poem even more painful is that it was written as a reflection of how Cowper himself was feeling in that moment. The last words of the poem compare Cowper to that man drowning alone at sea, and Cowper’s conclusion is that he was worse off than that man, as he concludes, “But I beneath a rougher sea, and whelm’d in deeper gulfs than he.”

Cowper’s depression as he wrote those words stemmed from the belief that he was condemned before God and could do nothing about it. He believed that no matter how hard he wanted it or how eager he was to obtain it, forgiveness could never be his. His sin had put him out of the reach of God’s forgiveness.

Have you ever felt like that? Maybe it’s because you felt that your particular sin was just too grievous to be forgiven. Maybe it’s because went back to a familiar sin that you thought you’d already put away. Whatever the reason, no doubt many, if not most of us, have struggled to believe we can be forgiven at one time or another. Maybe you’re even there right now. Maybe you walked into this room this morning, listening to the enemy tell you that you’re hopeless, that you don’t deserve to gather with your fellow believers, let alone try to open your mouth and praise the Lord. Maybe he’s telling you that the Lord has cast you off, and you’re hopelessly condemned, like Cowper felt writing that poem.

If that’s the case, then there’s good news. Zechariah is a powerful answer to Satan’s lies to keep us discouraged in our sin. It reminds us of the most glorious news—that there is indeed sure and certain hope to be forgiven and restored to sweet fellowship with our Lord. And we’re going to see this as we look at the first six verses of this often-neglected minor prophet this morning. But before we dive in, let me orient you to this the setting and divisions within the book of Zechariah.

The book divides into two halves: chapters 1-8 and chapters 9-14. In the first eight chapters, Zechariah is prophesying to Israel as they’re rebuilding the temple. However, starting in chapter 9, we’ve now jumped ahead a bit in time to a point where the temple is already completed. We

can see this, for example, in 11:13 where Zechariah tells us that he took thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord (which is the temple). And so the book naturally divides in half, between chapters 8-9.

Then, the first eight chapters divide into three sections by markers of time. In 1:1 the book opens by telling us that this word came to Zechariah, “In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius.” Then, in 1:7 we see another temporal marker as that section begins: “On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month.” And, finally, the third temporal marker is found in 7:1 which reads, “In the fourth year of King Darius.” Therefore, the first half of the book divides into three sections, indicated by three different temporal markers. But when you look at chapters 9-14, the temporal markers disappear. Instead, these chapters are divided by the phrase, “The oracle of the word of the LORD,” which begins chapter 9 and occurs again at the beginning of chapter 12.

So, that marks off five sections of the book (1:1-6, 1:7-6:15, 7-8, 9-11, and 12-14), which will guide most of our sermon series. However, in that second section, which contains eight visions Zechariah receives, we’ll slow down a bit and take a few sermons within that one section.

Second, let me give you the historical setting of the book because I think knowing it will help make sense of the temporal markers that occur in the first half of the book and will help us understand the purpose of the book as a whole. And to get the setting, it’s helpful to back up to a much earlier point in Israel’s history, to the point that Aaron just preached to us from 1 Kings 15-16.

If you remember what Aaron said a week ago, you’ll remember that after Solomon’s reign, the kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. And Aaron noted that in the northern kingdom, the kings were more wicked than the kings in Judah. Consequently, the northern kingdom of Israel faced judgment first as they were conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. But it wasn’t like Judah walked in holiness after that time. Eventually, they faced judgment as well, being conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC and many of their inhabitants were hauled off into exile.

But about fifty years later in 539 BC, after the Persians conquered the Babylonians, their leader, Cyrus, decreed that the Israelites could go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. We see this in Ezra 1:1-4. And so a little more than 40,000 Israelites went back to Jerusalem and began work on the temple, starting with its foundation, which they finish in their second year there, in about 538-537 BC. So, were good—until they weren’t.

Because of harassment, their own selfish desires, and the changing of Persian rulers, the work on the temple stopped after its foundation was laid, and nothing happened for the next seventeen years. Ezra 4:24 tells us, “Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

Well, what in the world made them start working on rebuilding the temple after neglecting it for nearly two decades? The opening words of Ezra 5 give us the answer. There, we read, “Now the

prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them” (Ezra 5:1-2).

God raised up two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah—to call his people back to obedience. Now, if you look at the opening of the book of Haggai, you’ll see that he begins his ministry in the sixth month of the second year of Darius’s reign, which would have been around August or September of 520 BC. And Haggai’s prophetic message is given to us in Haggai 1:8, as he says, “Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD.” And they do, that very month they begin rebuilding the temple (Haggai 1:14-15).

However, when the book of Zechariah opens and he begins his prophetic ministry, we read that it took place in the *eighth month* of the second year of Darius’s reign. That means we’re to October or November of 520 BC, two months after the start of Haggai’s ministry and two months after the people of Israel have begun rebuilding the temple. And you’ll see that Zechariah’s opening message isn’t specifically about rebuilding the temple—as they’ve already started building—but a call to repentance and returning to the Lord. One commentator appropriately writes, “While Haggai focused the people on building the temple for the Lord, God came to Zechariah and focused him on rebuilding the people and their faith.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, it’s not enough to just start rebuilding the temple, the people must face the sins that they had allowed to overcome their hearts. They needed to deal with their years of rebellion against their Lord. That’s what Zechariah calls them to do, starting with our text this morning. And as we look at his call to repentance, it helps us see a few things about the nature of the Lord toward his people. Specifically, I want to note three things that Zechariah’s opening message shows us about our Lord and his call for us to repent. First, note that God is the initiator in our repentance.

### **God is the initiator in our repentance**

As the book of Zechariah opens, the Lord comes with a word to him, saying, “The LORD was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts . . .’” Now, I want to pause there for a second and just ask what you might imagine would come after. I mean, here’s what’s taken place for years. God brought Israel out of Egypt only for them to rebel against him in the wilderness. Then, he brought a generation of Israelites into the promised land only for them to rebel against them. Then he brought a group out of exile to go back to Jerusalem and build the temple, and instead they’ve ignored the temple for the last seventeen years. Wouldn’t you anticipate that what would come is, “I’m done with you guys. I give you guys chance after chance. Every time I’ve blessed you, you have only responded with apathy or outright rebellion. Enough is enough”? That makes sense, doesn’t it? But this isn’t the word that the Lord gives to Zechariah to declare. Rather, he says, ‘Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips, *Zechariah*, Reformed Expository Commentary (P&R, 2007), 10.

LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts” (vv. 2-3). God isn’t saying, “I’m done with you.” He’s calling out to them to return to him so that he might bless them.

And this isn’t some exceptional circumstance. This is who our God is. He is the one who keeps sending the servants to the rebellious tenants who kill the servants again and again. He is the one who chases after the unfaithful one like Hagar. He is the one who says to us, “If you confess your sins, I’ll be faithful and just to forgive you.” When the Scripture says that God’s ways and thoughts are higher than ours, this is what it’s talking about. When we would cast off a rebellious one, he pleads for them to repent.

This characteristic of God is noted as his “steadfast love” in the Old Testament, and it comes up repeatedly. This year my Bible reading plan has been to read three chapters of the Bible and then pray through a psalm. And when you pray through a psalm, you notice if themes are repeated, and it is the steadfast love of the Lord that occurs repeatedly. Psalm 115, for example, begins, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and faithfulness.” Psalm 116 is all about the Lord exercising his steadfast love in delivering the psalmist as he cried out. Psalm 117 calls all the nations to praise the Lord because “great is his steadfast love toward us.” Psalm 118 begins, “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’ Let the house of Aaron say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’ Let those who fear the LORD say, ‘His steadfast love endures forever.’” Psalm 119 is obviously about God’s Word, but right in the middle of it we read, “The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love” (v. 64). And as we read in Psalm 136 to open the service, every other line reminds us that “his steadfast love endures forever.” Anyone who says that the OT presents a picture of an unloving God simply hasn’t read it. The steadfast love of the Lord dominates. And that’s what we’re seeing right here—this relentless love that keeps calling out to a rebellious people.

Israel has done everything to suggest the Lord should wipe his hands clean of them, yet he is crying out to them to come back to him, saying, “Return to me.” He’s pursuing them. And God is always the pursuer.

So, this morning, if the thought in your mind is that you’ve done something vile enough or repeatedly enough that God is done with you, then recognize that this is a lie and not from the Scripture. God is pursuing you this morning to return to him. He is not waiting to respond to you as if you want to be reconciled to him more than he longs to be reconciled to you. Rather, he’s started the conversation, and he’s saying, “Return to me.” Therefore, the right response to our sin is never to run and hide from God or try to distance ourselves from him in shame. Rather, run to him in repentance because God is the initiator of our repentance. Second, notice that God calls us to himself.

### **God calls us to himself**

Here’s what I mean. The word that God gives Zechariah to speak to his people isn’t simply, “Stop your sinful actions.” It’s return to *me*. The Christian life isn’t a life of doing the things we’re

supposed to do and not doing the things we're not supposed to do. It's a life of walking in relationship with God. We're always loving and trusting our Lord or not loving and not trusting him.

And this means that our sin isn't just doing something forbidden, it's failing to walk in proper relationship with God. For example, when you're gripped with anxiety about life, though the Scripture says not to be anxious, it's not just that you're doing what God commands us not to do. You're saying to the Lord, "I don't find you trustworthy enough to rest in you and be at peace. I feel, rather, that if things are going to be okay in my life, it must be because I've produced that result and am in control." And yet, because you're never in control, you're simply anxious. Thus, your anxiety is rooted in your lack of trust in the Lord and his goodness.

Therefore, when you repent of your anxiety, you're not simply saying, "I will try to stop being anxious." You're saying, "I will turn to the Lord and trust in him." The same thing is true when you chase the high of pornography or sexual immorality or gossiping. Each of these things provides merely fleeting pleasures that come with sin. And, yes, they must be stopped. But at its core, you've turned from God. You've stopped seeking the satisfaction and fulfillment that can come in him alone. You've turned from rivers of living water to drink from broken cisterns. And so your repentance must not simply be a stopping of the action but a turning to God. He says, "Return to *me*."

And this is why a foundational thing that must be done in fighting sin—in addition from fasting from the sinful thought or action—is to feast on the Lord. Delight in him, enjoy him, cultivate greater trust in him, and return to him if you've not done these things. When God calls us to repentance, he's calling us to himself. And third, notice that God always receives us in our repentance.

### **God always receives us in our repentance**

Through Zechariah, the Lord issues a command—"Return to me"—but not only a command. It also comes with a promise. The Lord says, "Return to me, and *I will return to you*" (v. 3). The Lord doesn't say, "Roll the dice. Return to me, and I'll see what kind of mood I'm in." Rather, he assures his people that if they return to him, he will return to them. And this stance of our Lord is throughout the Scripture. In the text we read earlier from 1 John 1:5-2:2, the Lord promises that if we confess our sins (return to him) he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (return to us). The Lord doesn't reject the repentant one.

Now, someone might say that I've ignored a key theme of judgment in this text. After all, the Lord mentions repeatedly that he judged their fathers before them. And that's true. The Lord exhorts them in verses 4-6a, saying, "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.' But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the LORD. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever. But by my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?"

But notice a few things about this. First, the Lord mentions the fathers of this current generation of Israelites not because he wants the current generation to meet the same fate as their fathers but precisely the opposite. He wants them to return and *not* face judgment. Second, the Lord declared the same word to their fathers as he is declaring to them. Did you notice that in verse 4? The former prophets cried to them, "Return from your evil ways and your evil deeds." So, God had not simply judged the fathers. He first pleaded with them to return to him. He judged them because they wouldn't respond to his call to repent. In verse 4 the Lord tells us, "But they did not hear or pay attention to me." And, finally, the Lord was therefore true to his word. Their fathers faced judgment, for the Word is always true.

I point all of that out for this purpose. The 'fathers' referenced here by the Lord don't disprove but prove this word from the Lord. He offered the same thing to them, but they refused to repent. And therefore God was true to his word in judging them. But, the God who is true to his word of judgment will also be true to his word of mercy. The one who promises judgment if we will not repent promises that he'll return to us if we do. And he'll deliver on that.

So what was the response of those in Zechariah's day to this message? At the very end of verse 6 we read, "So they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so he has dealt with us.'" In other words, they acknowledged that God had dealt in judgment as he promised. God was just. But it also suggests that God will also be true to his word of mercy, for just as he promises judgment for disobedience, so he promises mercy for repentance.

And so this morning, I pray that our response will be the same. Why would we not run toward the one who initiates our repentance, calls us to himself, and always receives us when we turn to him? My hope is that we'll repent and find the joy of walking in sweet fellowship with the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. May we remember him now as we come to the table. Amen.