

August 23, 2026

A FLYING SCROLL, A WOMAN IN A BASKET, AND OUR SIN

Zechariah 5:1-11

(6 of 10 in a series through Zechariah)

I want to start out by asking you to imagine a scene in your mind. Let's say it's ten years in the future. We're having one of our network conferences where we bring back all the guys that we've sent out to plant and pastor churches. Over this decade, imagine we've sent out dozens more, bringing them back to report on their labors. We've had to figure out ways to alter the conference format because there are so many guys from whom we want to hear reports. The excitement is off the charts. The theme of our conference that year is "Obeying the Great Commission," as we're stressing that the mission of every local church isn't something unique to them. We're all called to make disciples, preaching the gospel, baptizing converts, and then in the context of a local church teaching them to obey all that Christ commands. And we're delighted as a church that we're getting to play a role in this great mission. It seems that things couldn't be better.

Now, while all of that is going on, I want you to imagine that all kinds of sins are going unaddressed in our congregation. Adultery is happening and people are aware of it, but nothing is said. Marriages are ending in divorce without any comment. Many of our members are secretly engaging in viewing pornography. Others view their money not in terms of being an opportunity to store up treasure in heaven but simply to accumulate more and more treasures here, and no one challenges it. Gossip and back-biting are spreading through the membership of the church unchecked. Well, you get the picture. You might describe it using Dickens' opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times."

That seems to have been somewhat representative of what was going on in Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. After the Persian king, Cyrus, granted the Israelites permission to leave Babylon, go back to Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple, a little more than 42,000 of them did just that. And they got to work on their mission God had given them, laying the foundation of the temple within that first year. But then things had stalled. Because of discouragement, opposition, and distraction, they completely abandoned their mission to rebuild the temple for seventeen years. But then, at the end of those seventeen years, the Lord raised up two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah—to call the people to get back to the work of rebuilding the temple. And they did. But because the challenges remained, as the people continued to face reasons to be discouraged and opposition from many, the Lord gave Zechariah a series of visions, the first five of which would have given them great encouragement in their mission to rebuild the temple.

As we've seen in chapters 1-4 of Zechariah, these visions have been encouraging beyond what most could imagine. Through these visions God was giving to the prophet, the Lord was showing his people that he sees and knows what they're going through, that he'll one day set all things right, that he's doing something more glorious than they can imagine, that he'll purify their high

priest so that he might represent them, that he'll give their governor Zerubbabel all he needs to lead in finishing the task, that the temple will be completed, and that God would dwell there with them. He told them not to look down on the little that had been accomplished so far because these small beginnings would culminate in a finished temple where God would dwell amidst his people, and so they got to work, and indeed the temple would be finished about four years after Zechariah's prophecy.

Therefore, if all you had were these first five visions, you would have a picture of everything being glorious. The people were going about fulfilling the mission of rebuilding the temple that the Lord had given them, the Lord was encouraging them along the way, and they were given assurance by God himself that they would successfully complete the task. It was indeed the best of times in that sense.

But then the Lord gives a sixth and seventh vision in chapter 5 that shows us that we've not seen the full picture of what was going on in Jerusalem. Yes, the people were going about the mission of building the temple, but there was sin among the people that wasn't being addressed. In fact, it seems that there was sin that has been deliberately ignored and allowed to grow and spread among the community. And in the visions of chapter 5 the Lord makes clear that he is as concerned about the holiness of the people as he is their work in completing the mission he'd given them. He shows them in these next two visions that he is not going to turn a blind eye to their sin. Rather, he is going to expose their sin, bring judgment, and remove sin from the community.

Now, these things have direct application to how the Lord works with us today, but what I want to do this morning is not to mix in our application at the start. Rather, I want to show you two things the Lord wanted the Israelites in the sixth century to know, and then I want to note two things that we can be assured of regarding ourselves today and how our Lord works among us in light of Zechariah 5. So, let's start by noting that God shows his people through Zechariah that he'll expose sin and bring judgment.

God will expose sin and bring judgment

As this sixth vision begins, Zechariah says that he lifted his eyes and saw a flying scroll. Now, it's not as if, unlike today, scrolls were known to levitate off the ground and fly around in the sixth century BC. So, this is odd. And not only was this scroll flying around, but it was huge. The angel, who has been guiding Zechariah through these visions asks Zechariah what he sees, and Zechariah responds, "I see a flying scroll. Its length is twenty cubits, and its width ten cubits" (v. 2), which means that the scroll is thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide. Again, it's an extremely large, flying scroll.

Now, thankfully, we don't have to figure out what it represents because in the next verse the angel tells Zechariah, as we read, "Then he said to me, '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, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other

side. I will send it out, declares the LORD of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name. And it shall remain in his house and consume it, both timber and stones” (vv. 3-4).

Now, let’s clarify a few things just so we’re tracking. The idea of a curse being present where the people have sinned should not be an unexpected reality for us. Remember when the Lord gave the law to the Israelites, he specifically noted in Deuteronomy 28 that the people would receive all kinds of blessings if they obeyed God’s Word, but if they disobeyed God’s Word, they would be cursed. They would have diseases, the land would face drought and become unfruitful, there would be famine, and so on. Therefore, this scroll probably has God’s commands and the curses for disobeying those commands written on it, and it’s ready to bring those curses against these evildoers. It’s both exposing their sins and will bring the curse against them for their disobedience. But it’s the last sentence of verse 3 that requires even more explanation.

The word translated in the ESV “shall be cleaned out” can indeed mean that, but it can also mean “cleared” as in “cleared from guilt” or acquitted.¹ If it’s translated “shall be cleaned out” then the angel is telling Zechariah *what* the scroll will do. The scroll lists curses for those who steal and swear falsely written on it (the two sins the angel will identify), and it’s going to go through the land and purge the land of these people and their sins. It will clean them out, if you will. If it means “cleared from guilt,” then the angel isn’t telling Zechariah what the scroll will *do*. Rather, he’s telling him *why* the scroll will do what it’s going to do. It’s bringing God’s curse against those sinning because the community has allowed their sin to go unpunished. They’ve wrongly cleared of wrongdoing those who are stealing and bearing false witness and allowed them to go unpunished. And God is telling Zechariah that he will not allow that to continue. That’s why the scroll is coming to expose and bring the curse against sin.

For a few reasons, I think it’s this second option.² In verse 3 I believe God is saying to Zechariah that those sinners the community has turned a blind eye to and allowed to go unpunished, the Lord sees, knows, and is going to deal with. In fact, in verse 4, he pictures the scroll entering the house of the thief and the one bearing false witness because they cannot remain hidden from God, and the curse is going to fall on them and devour everything. That’s the message of the first vision—God is going to expose sin and bring judgment.

Then there’s another vision that may seem equally as confusing at first glance, but I think will make sense as we dive into it. And with this second vision God is showing that he will remove wickedness from among his people.

¹ The word is from the Hebrew root *nqh*, which is also found in Exodus 34:7, for example, where the Lord says that he will by no means “clear the guilty.”

² For arguments in favor of this translation see Bryan Gregory, *Longing for God in an Age of Discouragement: The Gospel according to Zechariah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 100-01 and Mark Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 294.

God will remove wickedness from among his people

Starting in verse 5, the angel points Zechariah to another vision. In this vision, Zechariah sees something going out, asks the angel what it is, and is told, “This is the basket going out” (v. 6). But then the angel quickly notes that this isn’t simply a basket but adds, “This is their iniquity in all the land” (v. 6). Adding to the intrigue, Zechariah is shown that the iniquity in the basket is personified as a woman. There was a lead cover on the basket that is lifted just long enough for Zechariah to see a woman sitting in the basket as he is told, “This is wickedness,” and then the woman representing wickedness was forced back down into the basket and a lead weight put on it so that she is contained in it.

Now, this reality of a woman personifying wickedness should not be surprising to us but not because women are always used throughout Scripture to picture wickedness. Rather, we often see in Scripture a woman used to personify realities that attempt to allure us—whether toward good or evil. In Proverbs, for example, we see lady wisdom calling us to come after her to be nourished with bread and wine (good things) while lady folly seeks to seduce us to eat stolen water and bread in secret (bad things), as she seeks our destruction. In other words, wisdom and folly are each personified as a woman who can allure us—whether toward the path of wisdom or folly. Wickedness, personified as a woman, is representing the same alluring reality here, as wickedness had successfully allured some Israelites to pursue her.

As the vision continues, we see that the Lord isn’t content with wickedness dwelling among his people. The next thing Zechariah sees is two women with wings like a stork, and they lift the basket and start taking it away, which prompts Zechariah to ask the angel, “Where are they taking the basket?” (v. 10), and the angel answers, “To the land of Shinar, to build a house for it. And when this is prepared, they will set the basket down there on its base” (v. 11).

Now, the land of Shinar appears in the Scripture prior to Zechariah. It’s in Genesis 11, where the people in their rebellion against God seek to build the tower of Babel, as we’re told the place where they do this is “in the land of Shinar” (11:2). In other words, the land of Shinar represents something like the opposite of Jerusalem, the place of God’s temple, where God dwells. It is the place of man’s rebellion. And so wickedness is taken away to dwell in a house in Shinar even as the Lord is establishing his temple as his house here. It’s a picture of contrast, but for our sake, the Lord is showing that wickedness should have had no home where God’s home (his temple) is among his people, and so he’s taking it away, back to where it belongs. God exposes, curses, and then removes sin from among his people.

Now, I don’t have to tell you that in Israel’s history doesn’t show God eradicating sin from among them at any point. This vision won’t be fully fulfilled until the resurrection and a new creation. But that’s how so many things in Zechariah work. The temple needs rebuilt and the people cleansed because they’re to be a faithful picture and shadow of what will one day be perfect, exceeding these types and shadows in every way.

Now, we may be saying, “Great, but how do these realities connect with us?” Well, in a couple ways. First, I want us to see that God is still committed to exposing sin among his people just as he pictured with the flying scroll in Zechariah’s day.

God exposes our sin

Now, I want to frame this in a way that is both challenging and encouraging to us, but let me first show you that Scripture speaks consistently about the fact that God knows our sins and will expose them. Consider Numbers 32:23 (“Be sure your sin will find you out”), Psalm 90:8 (“You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence”), Luke 12:2 (“Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known”), 1 Timothy 5:24 (“The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later”), or Hebrews 4:13 (“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account”).

Consider how God exposed David’s adultery with Bathsheba in light of the lengths to which David went to keep it secret. He thought his adultery would remain secret, and then she told him she was pregnant. So he brought Uriah home from war, hoping this would make it look like the baby was his, but Uriah slept outside in solidarity with the fellow soldiers. And eventually David had him killed—all to keep his sin from being exposed. Surely when David started staring at Bathsheba from the roof, he never dreamed this would lead to him murdering someone. But that’s the length to which he was willing to go to keep his sin from being exposed. And then, finally, though he had blood on his hands, he’d pulled it off, right? He could just say the baby was born a bit premature. His sin could remain forever their secret. Well, no, because the Lord knew his sin, and through the prophet Nathan exposed it so that David might repent.

God refuses to let us hold on to secret sin. And the reason is because he loves us. Proverbs 28:13 tells us, “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” God refuses to let us conceal our sins and not prosper when if they are exposed, we confess, and repent, we can obtain mercy.

Now, one of the kindest ways he exposes our sin is by letting us hear his Word and feel conviction by his Spirit so that we voluntarily confess our sin to him, forsaking it, and maybe even sharing with some others in order to have their aid in your fight against sin. But if you refuse and try to hold onto it and keep it secret, know that your Father loves you too much not to bring it out to the light. Just this last month I heard of two men who tried to keep their sin secret, and the Lord kindly exposed them so that they might repent of it, forsake it, and find mercy.

Now, to encourage you to deal with your sin this morning, let me note one difference between this text and us. In the vision, this huge scroll flies around, sees all those whose sins haven’t been exposed or have been ignored, and it not only exposes those sins but brings God’s judgment—his curse. But if your faith is in Christ, you can confess your sin without fearing that you’ll bear God’s curse? You can be confident that you’ll find mercy and no curse. Why? It’s

because Christ bore the curse for us. Christ bore the curse your secret sin you've been holding onto deserves.

That's what we read earlier in Galatians 3:13—"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." And so you no longer have to conceal your sin out of fear of judgment but can confess it, obtain mercy, and not have to walk around with it eating at you and devouring you. And I know it does. Listen again to David's words in Psalm 32:3-5, "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."

Follow the path David lays out here and know the freedom and joy he's writing about, and let's give thanks that our God loves us enough to expose our sin. Let him do it today through his Word. Second, recognize that God removes sin from us.

God removes sin from us

I've already noted that God won't completely remove sin from his people until the resurrection, and yet there are a few ways that this forthcoming glorious day is pictured now. First, as a church, the Lord wants us to reflect as best we can that day where sin won't taint any part of the redeemed created order. And this is one reason why when a professing believer refuses to repent, we exercise church discipline, saying, "We do not believe this one belongs to Christ and represents him," removing him or her from the membership of the church. And we do it in love for the individual (hoping it will bring repentance), for the church (trying to stop the spread of sin to others), and for the Lord (so that his people might not profane his name in this world). So the act of removing unrepentant sinners from the membership of the church is not only something God commands but something that reflects the pure, holy, glorious new creation that is coming, where God will completely remove sin.

Second, as an individual Christian, if you're repentant and trusting in Christ, then know that the Lord really has removed your sin from being charged against you. Psalm 103:12 tells us that "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." When we confess and forsake our sins instead of concealing and holding onto them, the Lord removes them, never to be brought against us. I heard a former abortionist who is now a Christian say, "I once killed babies but now I'm white as snow." That can only be said without shame—and indeed joyfully—by one who knows that God has removed his sin. And that's true of us. There is no condemnation for the one who is in Christ Jesus.

And, finally, though the Lord will not remove sin entirely until the resurrection, he has right now removed sin's dominion over us. In other words, if you're a believer, you're not enslaved to sin. You once were, but Romans 6 makes clear that we have died to sin and its enslaving power. So, I know the enemy may be telling you, "You'll never be free of this sin," but don't believe him. Your Lord has lived, died, and been raised so that you might walk in newness of life in him. So,

this morning, don't conceal and hold on to your sin. Confess it and forsake it so that you may obtain mercy, and by the Spirit's power, walk away from it, recognizing you're no longer enslaved. Perhaps this morning we can picture God's Word floating above us, identifying our sin and the judgment we deserve, then we can remember that Christ paid the penalty for that sin—bearing the curse for us—and so we can confess it, picturing God removing it away from us forever. Let's picture that now as we come to the table. Amen.