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THE DIVINE WARRIOR AND A GLORIOUS TEMPLE

Zechariah 6:1-15

(7 of 10 in a series through Zechariah)

In 1839 the London Missionary Society sent two men, John Williams and James Harris, to the New Hebrides islands of the South Pacific. It was a risky venture as the natives there were reported to be uneducated, uncivilized, violent cannibals. And yet the London Missionary Society rightly understood that these people needed the gospel. And so, the two men set sail toward the islands and eventually set foot among these people with an eagerness to tell them about Jesus. But, sadly, within only minutes of their arrival, the two men were killed and their bodies eaten.

Nineteen years later in 1858, John Paton set sail with his wife to go back to those islands with the gospel. He knew the risks. Paton wrote in his journal of an elderly man whom he simply identified as “Mr. Dickson” who warned him upon news of Paton’s desire to go to these people, “You will be eaten by cannibals!” Paton replied that Mr. Dickson, who was late in years, would soon die and his body be eaten by worms, and so whether Paton’s body was eaten by worms or cannibals, it would rise on the resurrection day just as gloriously.¹

And though Paton didn’t suffer the same fate as the two men before him, his suffering was immense. Within the first year of arriving, he’d lose his wife and newborn son to disease. Four years later he’d remarry and relocate to a different island among the New Hebrides, but the dangers remained and were consistent. There were no doctors to treat sickness, and yet fourteen times he reports having the same illness that had taken his wife and son, many of those times, believing he would soon succumb to death. There was a hurricane in 1873 that took lives of people on the island. But the most common threat came from natives there. He consistently writes of being threatened, hunted, having his house surrounded, and each time escaping by the sheer grace of God. And yet, the gospel had an amazing impact so that Paton could eventually write, “I claimed Aniwa [the island where he ministered] for Jesus, and by the grace of God, Aniwa now worships at the Savior’s feet.”²

But this raises the question: “What motivated John Paton and enabled him to persevere in light of such difficulties as he sought to obey the mission given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ?” And I don’t ask that merely as an academic inquiry. Right now, Casey and Guily Kidd, whom we’ve sent to Peru to work with the Matsés, are trying to convince these believers who live on the border of Peru and Brazil to do this very thing.

¹ *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography Edited by His Brother* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, orig. 1889), 56.

² *Ibid.*, 312.

There is a Brazilian tribe of people who resemble the tribal peoples of the New Hebrides in the middle of the 19th century. They need the gospel, but everyone understands that if you approach them, no matter how well-intended, you'll likely be laying down your life. And because of this, the government has made it illegal for anyone to have contact with them—except the Matsés. And so Casey is tasked with encouraging these people to risk their lives for the sake of taking the gospel to this potentially dangerous people. And so, when I ask what it is that motivated and strengthened John Paton to persevere in such dangerous circumstances, it is with genuine interest in light of Casey's labors? And though there's much you can gather from Paton's writings, I think two truths stand out as what he held to in order to persevere. First, he had a deep trust that Jesus Christ ruled over all. Reflecting on a moment when he was surrounded by natives, intent on telling him, he wrote:

"My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. . . . I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth. He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the Savage of the South Seas."³ He knew Jesus ruled over all.

Second, he believed that Jesus Christ alone possessed the power to change men's hearts. Paton wrote as a prayer, "Oh, Jesus! To You alone be all the glory. You have the key to unlock every heart that You have created."⁴

These two convictions that Paton held onto must be believed and held by the Matsés as well, if they're ever going to risk their lives to take the gospel to this unreached people in Brazil. And these convictions must be ours if we're going to remain faithful to the mission Christ has given us. But it's not enough for us to tell ourselves that we must hold these truths dear because John Paton did. We must believe that God has revealed these truths to us in his Word. And one place these truths shine most vividly in Scripture is in Zechariah 6, as the Lord gives Zechariah his eighth and final vision and gives him a Word to proclaim to his people. Specifically, I think the message of Zechariah 6 can be summed up with this truth: God rules over all, exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son, who is gathering a people from all nations with whom God will dwell forever. And I want to show this to us in three parts. First, God rules over all.

God rules over all

As Zechariah lifts up his eyes to see this eighth and final vision, he sees four chariots, pulled by horses of different colors, coming out from between two bronze mountains. And, as with the

³ Ibid., 207.

⁴ Ibid., 373 (I've changed "Thee" and "Thou" to "You" and "Hast" to "Have" in this quote).

other visions, he asks the angel, “What are these, my lord?” (v. 4). And the angel answers Zechariah, “These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth. The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country.” (vv. 5-6). And we’re told that these strong horses were chomping at the bit, impatient to go, and they were told, “Go, patrol the earth” and they did, until at last we’re told that the heavenly voice cried, “Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country” (v. 8).

Now, as we’ve asked repeatedly with these visions, what do we do with this? Well, let’s take it a bit at a time. First, this is similar to a vision we saw back in chapter 1 where horses had come to the Lord after patrolling the earth to report to him. But in that case, there were just riders on horses without any mention of chariots. And the reason this note is crucial is because a chariot was an instrument of war. When God is presented as a divine warrior in the Scripture, you’ll see references to the clouds as his chariot (e.g. Psalm 104:3), which indicates he is coming to make war. These represent God rising up to demonstrate his power.

Second, note where they’re coming from. In the first vision of the horses, they had patrolled the earth, and they were coming to report. Now, we’re told that they’re coming out from between two bronze mountains (v. 1), after having presented themselves to the Lord (v. 5). What do we make of this? Well, remember in the temple Solomon built, he constructed two bronze pillars that we’re over fifty feet tall that stood at the entrance to the temple (2 Chron 3:15-17). Well, the temple was patterned after the heavenly temple (Heb 9:23-24). It was a small picture of God’s abode in heaven. In other words, Solomon’s two bronze pillars at the entrance to his temple were to picture these bronze mountains which are at the entrance to the heavenly temple. Therefore, these horses, pulling chariots, have come from the heavenly dwelling place of God, and after being in his presence, they are ready to go to war, to demonstrate God’s power over all.

These horses represent God’s presence, wherever they go. In Zechariah 1 we were reminded by them patrolling all the earth that God sees and knows all that is going on in the whole earth. Well, now as they’re equipped for war, we’re reminded of God’s power, a power that extends over all. We’re reminded of God’s universal power in a few ways. First, I’ve noted that in apocalyptic literature, like we find here and in the book of Revelation, the number four symbolizes something that is world-wide in scope. That’s why, for example, when John tells us in Revelation that the Lord is saving a people from all over the world, he mentions it in a four-fold way: from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. Well, notice the four-fold notes in this vision. There are four sets of horses—red, black, white, and dappled—and they are going out to the “four winds of heaven” (v. 5). That is, we’re to see that God’s power is world-wide. Then, note the repetition of the “earth” in verse 7: “When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth. And he said, ‘God, patrol the earth.’ So they patrolled the earth.” Again, God reigns over the whole earth. Finally, notice in verse 5 that the horses had presented themselves before “the Lord of *all the earth*.” And so we’re to see through these horses that God’s powerful rule extends over all.

Finally, we see specifically that two areas are targeted. In verse 6 we see that the chariots with black horses and white horses go “toward the north country” while the dappled horses go “toward the south country.” We have to assume the red ones await further instruction. But why did these other horses specifically target the north and south country? Well, the answer is that this is where the enemies of God’s people have been. In the south is Egypt, who’d enslaved God’s people for years. Then, Assyria and Babylon had invaded from the north.⁵ Moreover, Persia was now in the north, exercising its reign over Jerusalem.

Now, before we draw our conclusions on all that these details affirm, let’s let our minds go back to the scene in Zechariah 1. The horses had patrolled the whole earth and came back to report to the Lord that “all the earth remains at rest” (1:11). But instead of that being good news—like we might anticipate—we were told that the Lord’s response was, “I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease” (1:15). The reason is because these nations had rebelled against the Lord and brought disaster to the Lord’s people, so them being at rest is not comforting.

Fast-forward to our text, and after the Lord sends out his chariots against these nations that opposed him and his people, he says at the end of verse 8, “Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country.” In other words, those nations that were at peace were about to feel the hand of God’s judgment. God was exercising his ruling hand over and against them.

So, this vision of the four chariots is telling us that God rules over all the earth. He exalts nations and brings them down at his bidding. There may be a time when things seem to be going against his people, but God rules and will one day judge. He’s the God of all the earth.

And that message is true today. God rules over the islands of the New Hebrides. He reigns over the peoples along the borders of Peru and Brazil. He reigns over Ukraine, Russia, Taiwan, China, Jackson, Tennessee and all the earth. At any one point, it may feel like the enemy is in control, but that’s never the case. That confidence of God’s sovereign rule strengthened John Paton to go into enemy-occupied territory with the gospel, and it should always strengthen you and me no matter our situation. The God who loves us and made us his own beloved children rules over all. You and I get to live our lives knowing that’s true. That’s the first part of our statement: God rules over all. But we can add to it as we look at the second half of our text, noting that God rules over all, exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son.

Exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son

After the final vision, Zechariah receives a word from the Lord not in the form of a vision but a direct command. He is told, “Take from the exiles Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah, who have

⁵ Babylon didn’t necessarily lie to the north of Jerusalem, but because of geographical reasons, they would have invaded them from the north.

arrived from Babylon, and go the same day to the house of Josiah, the son of Zephaniah. Take from them silver and gold, and make a crown, set it on the head of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. And say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Behold, the man whose name is the Branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.’ And the crown shall be in the temple of the LORD as a reminder to Helem, Tobijah, Jedaiah, and Hen the son of Zephaniah” (vv. 10-14).

So, Zechariah is told about three men who are part of the exiles who came from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Perhaps they heard that work was resuming on building the temple and made their way back with donations of silver and gold. And Zechariah is instructed to take that silver and gold and weave it together into a crown⁶ that he is to set on the head of the high priest, Joshua.

Now, that is odd because according to the law of Moses, a king could not perform priestly duties. These offices of king and priest were strictly separated. A high priest would have to descend from the tribe of Levi, while the kings in David’s line would have to come from the tribe of Judah. In other words, these two offices couldn’t be held by one person. So, putting a royal crown on the head of Joshua, the high priest, was an odd picture.

But remember the last time Joshua held center stage in this book, Zechariah saw a vision of him, and he was told that he was a “sign.” He was a picture of one whom God would bring, whom the Lord identified as the “Branch” (3:8). Well, the same thing is seen here. Right after the crown is placed on Joshua’s head, immediately the Lord speaks of one whom he will raise up called the “Branch” (v. 12).

Now, as I mentioned when this imagery first came up in Zechariah 3, Isaiah had also prophesied of this “Branch.” After the exile, when there was no longer any son of David reigning on the throne, it looked like this royal tree of David was cut down to a stump. The line was done. But then Isaiah prophesied, saying, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse [David’s father], and a *branch* from his roots shall bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1). Jeremiah had prophesied the same, as the Lord said through him, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5). In other words, the “Branch” is a reference to God’s promised, eternal king through David’s line, the Messiah—Jesus—who would be both king and priest.

⁶ The Hebrew noun for crown is plural but the verb is singular. Therefore, some have suggested he is to make two crowns, but it’s most likely that he’s to take the two precious metals and weave them together into one crown. See Richard Phillips, *Zechariah*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 143.

Zechariah is told that the reason Joshua, the high priest, is to have a crown set on his head is because he pictures one who will bring these offices of priest and king together. Jesus, as our high priest, offers himself as a sacrifice for our sins and rises to overcome death, and as our king, he reigns over all.

Connecting this to the point we saw in the first half of the chapter, our Lord has always purposed to reign over the earth through a human. That's why Adam was set over the earth in the first place. Made in God's image, he was to represent God's rule over the earth. But he sinned and failed in that task. But the Son of God took on flesh as the second Adam so that he might fulfill this role perfectly, and indeed he does. Right now a human being—the God man—reigns over this world at God's right hand. And God exercises his rule through his crucified and risen Son, the priest-king. What this means is that the one who rules over us is the one who loves us and gave himself for us.

That crown that Zechariah put on Joshua's head, he eventually took and put it in the temple (v. 14) until the one should come to whom it belonged. And a little over 500 years later, that king came, lived, died, and was raised. And now he reigns, and he will reign until every enemy, including death, is put under his feet. God rules over all, exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son. But we can also add one more piece: God rules over all, exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son, *who is gathering a people from all nations with whom God will dwell forever.*

Who is gathering a people from all nations with whom God will dwell forever

As Zechariah places the crown on Joshua's head as a sign of the priest-king who would come, the Lord also tells him what this coming king would do—he would build the temple. In verse 12 we're told, "He shall build the temple of the LORD." Then, in verse 15, "And those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the LORD. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. And this shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God."

Now, because the Lord had shown a vision earlier in which he noted Zerubbabel would build the temple, some think this must be a reference to Zerubbabel. But that's missing the point. The temple which Zerubbabel would build in the sixth century B.C. would be a sign for a greater temple that the Lord Jesus Christ would one day build. That's what the Lord is telling Zechariah here. The branch would build a glorious temple in the days to come.

So, what does that mean? Are we to look for Jesus to rebuild a physical building, a temple in Israel at some point? No, Paul makes clear what kind of temple Jesus is building in Ephesians 2. After talking about the Lord bringing the Gentiles to faith, he tells us that they (along with believing Jews) are being formed into a "holy temple in the Lord," "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:20-22). Peter, likewise, refers to believers as "living stones" which are "being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5), by which he means a temple.

In other words, just as the temple was a building where God chose to let his presence dwell, now Jesus is building a temple of people with whom he will dwell forever. And those people are people near and far off, as Zechariah is told—Jews and Gentiles who will bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what the temple Zechariah would oversee the building of always was to picture, a temple of people who would be God's people and among whom our Lord would dwell forever. That's what Jesus is doing. And as he has saved each of us, it's so that we might be one more living stone in this glorious temple of people who will dwell with God forever.

What sustained John Paton on the mission field, enabling him to persevere despite his life being threatened? What will move and sustain the Matsés to—in a very real way—put their lives at risk to reach a Brazilian tribe with the gospel? And what will keep individuals in our congregation continuing to rise up and say, "I want to take the gospel outside of Jackson and plant churches where disciples might be made and taught to obey all that Christ commands"? It was and will be the understanding that God rules over all, exercising his reign through his crucified and risen Son, who is gathering a people from all nations with whom God will dwell forever. If that's true, then we can give our lives in seeking to play a role in building this glorious temple of people among whom God—who rules over all—will dwell. Therefore, let's come to the table confessing our faith in this glorious truth today. Amen.