

OT / COMMENTARY

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C H R I S T - C E N T E R E D

Exposition

E X A L T I N G J E S U S I N

ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI



Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah,
Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

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Zechariah

Go Home!

ZECHARIAH 1:1-6

Main Idea: God calls His people to return when we wander far from Him.

- I. **God's Righteous Wrath Calls Us to Return to Him (1:1-3).**
 - II. **God's Repeated Warnings Call Us to Return to Him (1:4-6a).**
 - III. **God's Reassuring Words Call Us to Return to Him (1:6b).**
-

My sweet family likes to say that I am directionally challenged. Under my leadership, I have gotten us lost in some of the finest cities in the United States. By myself, I have been hopelessly lost over and over again in all kinds of places throughout the years. I have even been in communities within five miles of where I live without a clue how I got where I was or where I needed to turn next. That is why I was so happy several years ago to get a car with a satellite navigation system. For a directionally impaired person like me, that system, with its gentle but authoritative computerized voice instructing me where and when to turn next, has been a gift from heaven. I rarely get mixed up with my directions anymore. And even if I do, my navigation system has a fail-safe: the “Go Home” button. As long as I have that button, no matter where I am, I know I am never lost. I can push “Go Home,” and instantly a voice begins to direct me back to my home address.

Until we come to know God, follow Him, and walk with Him, our hearts will not be at home. In his *Confessions* Augustine famously prayed, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they

rest in You” (*Confessions*, 45). There is a deep reality of lostness that we experience before we come to Jesus as Savior. Only hearing the gospel and placing saving faith in Christ can cure that restlessness of heart. Even as saved people, it is possible to wander from close fellowship with the Lord because of persistent sin without repentance. I have heard some older believers graphically describe this as “walking at a guilty distance.” Pastor and author A. W. Tozer acknowledged, “One serious and often distressing problem for many Christians is their feeling that God is far from them, or that they are far from God, which is the same thing” (*Born*, 119).

The hope of the gospel is that lost people can be found and that distant and wandering believers can come back to the Lord. God has put something that says “Go Home!” inside every human heart. Jesus calls us to return when we wander far from Him. The need to return to the Lord is great. So many people who call themselves followers of Jesus simply are not following Jesus. In nearly every moral category professing Christians have become just like the lost world. Consider these measurements:

- Divorce rates among Christians are about the same as those for non-Christians.
- Christian men regularly view pornography as often as non-Christian men.
- Christians are more than twice as likely to have racist attitudes as non-Christians.
- One in four people living together outside marriage call themselves evangelical.
- Only about 6 percent of evangelicals regularly tithe.
- Domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and most other problems are as prevalent among Christians as among non-Christians. (Putnam and Harrington, *DiscipleShift*, 20)

In so many regards there is no distinguishable difference between those who claim to be saved and those who do not know Christ at all. We have gotten far from the Lord, and we need to return.

God’s call for His people to return to Him is the first prophetic message in the book of Zechariah. Before we delve into that message, however, let’s set the table for our study by examining some important information. Notice the three names at the end of verse 1: “Zechariah son of Berechiah, son of Iddo.” Here we have the name of the prophet,

his father, and his grandfather. Each man's name has a significant meaning. Zechariah's name means "the LORD remembers." Each mention of his name reminded the prophet and others that God never forgets His people. As a side note, any time in the Old Testament a name ends with "-iah," that's the name of the Lord ("Yah," short for "Yahweh") at the end of that person's name, whether it's Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hezekiah, or Zechariah. So, Zechariah's name means "the Lord, Yahweh, remembers." The name of his father, *Berechiah*—again, you see the "-iah"—means "the LORD blesses." His grandfather's name, *Iddo*, means "in time."

Put those names together, and they provide us a clue as to the theme of this entire book: The Lord remembers and blesses at His set time.

At the beginning of the verse you will notice the time during which this book was written: "In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius." The eighth month, according to the Hebrew calendar, would have corresponded with our month of October or November. Additionally, God's message came to the prophet "in the second year of Darius." Darius was a Gentile king, a pagan ruler, governing the land of Persia. Based on what history tells us about the years of Darius's rule, Zechariah's prophecy would have been given to God's people about 520 years before the coming of Jesus Christ.

Zechariah was living in the land of Judah, in the vicinity of Jerusalem. He was there with many Jewish people who had returned from years of exile to the land of Judah. God's people had turned away from Him so greatly that He finally had given them over to their sin and sent in an invading army from Babylon. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had taken into captivity all the Jewish people from Jerusalem and throughout the region of Judah. They were separated from their homeland. Then God began to work to return His people back to the promised land.

By the time of Zechariah, God's people had been back in Jerusalem for nearly two decades. Sixteen years before, the people of Judah had begun rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. They had laid the foundations with great fanfare and celebration, but they encountered opposition. They faced people living in the land who hated them. These people were constantly fighting against them and trying to get them to stop, criticizing them and doing everything they could to oppose them. So God's people got discouraged and stopped building. For 16 years they had taken no action. Now, God was speaking. He had spoken

through His prophet Haggai, and now a word came through Zechariah, calling the people to continue the work that God had given them to do to return to Him.

In Zechariah 1:1-6 God sent a message to the Jews who had come back to Jerusalem. Now back in their homeland, they had grown cold in their spiritual lives. The initial enthusiasm they had for rebuilding the new temple had turned into complacency and discouragement. Their work had stopped, their faithfulness had wilted, and the Lord was not pleased. Haggai's primary purpose was to get the people to restart the work of building the Lord's house. Zechariah's purpose went even deeper. He called the people to a renewed closeness to the Lord. Our text shows how God works when we have strayed, calling us back to Himself. With compelling yet compassionate language, this text reveals three motivations for returning to the Lord.

God's Righteous Wrath Calls Us to Return to Him

ZECHARIAH 1:1-3

In the opening message of his prophecy, Zechariah reminded the Jewish people, "The LORD was extremely angry with your ancestors." The language of the Scripture conveys intense indignation on God's part.

The text literally says that the Lord was "angry with anger." In English we consider it redundant to use the same word twice. In Hebrew, however, repeating the same word amplifies the force of the expression. For God to say that He was "angry with anger" means that His displeasure with His people was severe and penetrating.

God further emphasized the seriousness of His anger by referring to Himself with the name *the LORD* or *Yahweh*. Using this personal, covenantal name was a reminder that God's anger came not from a distant, dispassionate Creator, but from *Yahweh*, who had lovingly pursued a relationship with the very people who had rejected Him.

Notice also that Zechariah was pointing back to Israel's history as he spoke of God's anger. The Lord's extreme displeasure had been directed toward the "ancestors" or the forefathers of the generation of Jews Zechariah was now addressing. Psalm 78 summarizes the rebellion and wickedness of pre-exilic Israel this way:

They did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by His law. They forgot what He had done, the wonderful works He had shown them.

(vv. 10-11)

The Lord—who had redeemed Israel out of Egyptian slavery, who had given them His law and made a lasting covenant with them, who had brought them into the promised land and established them there, who had shown them faithfulness and mercy even when they were rebellious and idolatrous, and who had sent numerous prophets to warn them—had now become intensely angry at the people of Israel and Judah because of their refusal to return to Him.

God instructed Zechariah to plead with the Jews who had come back to Jerusalem after the exile. Zechariah's words of warning were hedged on every side by reminders of God's sovereignty. Three times in verse 3 God instructs His prophet to invoke His authority: "This is what the LORD of Hosts says," "this is the declaration of the LORD of Hosts," and "says the LORD of Hosts."

The phrase LORD of Hosts describes *Yahweh* as King over His people and commander of the angelic armies of heaven. It is as though God were telling Zechariah, "Make sure everybody understands this is not just a man speaking; this is Almighty God speaking in power." In light of His righteous wrath with past generations, God called to His people, "Return to Me."

Recently, while I was driving down Interstate 4 in Florida, I saw a large billboard with these words: "God is *not* angry." There was no message on the sign. No phone number. No name of an organization that had sponsored the advertisement. Just the words: "God is *not* angry." Someone had invested a good deal of money to have the sign put up. The message must have been very important to that person. He or she wanted to assure the world—or at least everyone traveling on that highway—there is no need to fear the Lord's anger. In truth, to many people, God's anger seems incompatible with His overall character.

The problem is that when we hear "The LORD was extremely angry," our immediate assumption is to think that God's anger must somehow be like our anger. We cannot accept that God might be angry the way we become angry. Our anger causes us to lash out with words we later regret. Our anger causes us to hold on to grudges that eventually destroy relationships. Our anger can harden into long-term bitterness and an unforgiving spirit that destroys us. So when we read in God's Word that God is love, God is merciful, God is gracious, God is forgiving, and God is kind, it seems logical for us to say that this same God could not also be angry.

But God's anger is not like our anger. He does not pitch temper tantrums, nor is He an ogre in heaven, eagerly waiting to lash out at people.

God is slow to anger (Nah 1:3). Yet, the Bible is clear in our text that sin and rebellion make the Lord “extremely angry.” Both the Old and New Testaments speak of God’s wrath along with His love (Exod 34:6-7; John 3:16,36). There are circumstances where God does express His anger. Our attitudes and actions can evoke His anger. People can become the objects of His anger. When people deliberately take the path of sin and rebellion, when we determine to distance ourselves from Him, we experience God’s anger, His righteous wrath, just as the Jewish people did in their history. God is angry at sin in my life and in your life. And when we rebel against Him, we place ourselves into His anger zone.

Several years ago our family spent a day at SeaWorld in Orlando and visited Shamu Stadium. As we came into the arena, we noticed that close to the tank where the huge black and white killer whales perform, the seats and concrete risers around them were all painted blue. These rows are known as the “Soak Zone.” Before the show began, an announcement came over the PA system warning that everyone in the soak zone would definitely get wet, even drenched. Sure enough, when Shamu and the other killer whales circled into the tank and started jumping and splashing around, the soak zone lived up to its name. Most of the people in those seats took an impromptu bath. Now, Shamu did not soak those people because he picked them arbitrarily for splashing. They got drenched only because of where they were sitting, a place that had been duly marked and about which they had been warned.

God also has an anger zone. Just as the people sitting in the soak zone got soaked, those who place themselves in a posture of rebellion and sin against God will experience His righteous wrath. When we live a rebellious life, continue in sin, or refuse to trust and follow the Lord, we place ourselves in His anger zone, all because of where we have chosen to place ourselves spiritually.

The only way out of God’s anger zone is to repent and return to Him. When we His people return to Him, He has promised He will return to us: “Return to Me . . . and I will return to you.” God’s promise to return to us if we return to Him is another way that His anger differs from human anger. Sadly, when we get angry with someone and they try to make amends, we often say, “I don’t care what you do. I’m going to stay angry.” That’s not how God works. Even in His anger He is ready to forgive when we return. His anger is not temperamental or unpredictable, but righteous and just. Sinful choices on our part put us in God’s anger zone, but returning to Him restores us.

God's Repeated Warnings Call Us to Return to Him

ZECHARIAH 1:4-6A

We should return to God because of His righteous wrath. But the text goes on to show that we should return because of God's repeated warnings. Again, the Lord points to the negative example of Israel's past in order to call His people to turn back to Him (v. 4). This marks the second of four times in this passage that God points to the "ancestors" of the present generation (see also vv. 2, 5, and 6). Here God reminds the Jews of the warnings the "earlier prophets" had proclaimed before the Babylonian captivity. In all likelihood these prophets were men like Isaiah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah who warned God's people of the approaching exile that resulted from their sin.

Zechariah summarizes the proclamation of the earlier prophets with the command "Turn from your evil ways and your evil deeds." The major subject of these pre-exilic preachers had been repentance. The word translated "turn" in verse 4 is the same Hebrew word translated "return" twice in verse 3. Walter Kaiser draws a distinction between "evil ways" and "evil deeds." "Evil ways" refers to a mindset or an attitude that leans toward wicked choices. "Evil deeds" indicates going a step further, to the actual activity of evil and sin. While some people only lean toward evil and others actually commit evil acts, God condemned evil in all its forms, and called His people to turn away from it (Kaiser and Ogilvie, *Micah*, 305).

The theme of repentance had been especially prominent in Jeremiah's preaching. In Jeremiah 3 the prophet had declared to Judah that even the northern kingdom of Israel, with all of its idolatry and wickedness, could find hope by returning to the Lord:

Go, proclaim these words to the north, and say: Return, unfaithful Israel. This is the LORD's declaration. I will not look on you with anger, for I am unfailing in My love. This is the LORD's declaration. I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God. You have scattered your favors to strangers under every green tree and have not obeyed My voice. This is the LORD's declaration. "Return, you faithless children"—this is the LORD's declaration—"for I am your master, and I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion." (Jer 3:12-14)

In the final days of Judah, just before the people were taken into exile, Jeremiah had warned the people repeatedly, “Turn back to God. Return to God.” But they would not listen. They refused to pay attention. Instead of repenting, they mocked Jeremiah. They tormented and tortured the prophet. Jeremiah had watched with tears in his eyes as his beloved city Jerusalem was destroyed and God’s people were taken away. They did not heed. They did not pay attention. They continued in their rebellion against God.

Decades later, God asked these questions through Zechariah: “Where are your ancestors now? And do the prophets live forever?” Imagine the response of the Jewish people to those two questions the Lord asked. “Where are your ancestors now?” *Well, Lord, You know where they are. You took them from this land to a place far away, and they went there and died because they would not listen.* “And do the prophets live forever?” *No, Lord, they eventually stopped prophesying and our ancestors never paid attention.* We should return to the Lord because His warnings, though graciously repeated, do not last forever. Our time to respond to Him is limited.

The word *overtake* in verse 6 means “to catch up.” The same word is used in Deuteronomy, when Moses promised the children of Israel that His blessings would overtake them if they obeyed God, but also warned that curses would overtake them if they disobeyed:

All these blessings will come and overtake you, because you obey the LORD your God. (Deut 28:2)

But if you do not obey the LORD your God by carefully following all His commands and statutes I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overtake you. (Deut 28:15)

Eventually, the word the Lord sent to Israel and Judah through the prophets caught up with them because they ignored His repeated warnings. It is a dangerous thing to decide to ignore the warnings that God gives us—warnings from His Word, warnings He gives through pastors and preachers, or warnings He brings through the godly people in our lives.

Pastor Bobby Welch tells a story, and for the setting he uses the longest bridge in the world over water, the 24-mile Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, which stretches from the north shore of New Orleans into the city. At times fog will roll in over the lake and you can barely see in front of you on that bridge. It was one of those foggy days, and a man was creeping along as bank after bank of fog came in. Suddenly, right in

front of him, the man saw someone running straight toward his car, waving his arms and screaming. The driver changed lanes and kept creeping forward. The man running toward him got into the other lane and continued running toward him, still waving his arms and screaming. As the running man got closer, the driver began to make out the words he was screaming: “Stop! Stop! In the name of God, stop! The bridge is out! The bridge is out!”

Finally the man driving got the message and stopped. He got out of his car, and together, he and the other man crawled through the fog until they came to a place where a barge going across Lake Pontchartrain had hit the bridge and taken a whole section out. Half a dozen people had driven off into the water and had died instantly. The two men looked at the horrific scene of people who had plummeted into the lake, struggling for their lives. The man who had been driving that car was so thankful that someone had cared enough to warn him.

When a pastor preaches a message of judgment or a message that talks about God’s anger, it is not usually popular. But it is an urgent message. And ultimately, it is a loving message motivated by concern for the souls of men and women. That’s why we must share the message of repentance with others and heed it ourselves. Make no mistake: a time is coming when God’s repeated warnings will stop. “Where are your ancestors now? And do the prophets live forever?” A time will come when our lives will be over. Or a time may come when the person who has warned us and called us to turn back to Jesus Christ will no longer be in our lives. People who sound the warnings in our lives may seem to be a thorn in our side and their message may seem negative or tiresome as they keep telling lost people to turn to Christ for salvation or urging wayward believers to return to the Lord. But the time will come when God’s judgment will overtake those who reject God’s warnings.

God’s Reassuring Words Call Us to Return to Him

ZECHARIAH 1:6B

At the end of our text, the Lord provides a third motivation to His people to return to Him: reassurance of His kind and merciful intentions toward them. In all likelihood “they repented” refers to what the pre-exilic Israelites had done during and immediately after their captivity. They came to understand they had been taken away from their homeland because of their refusal to obey the warnings of God’s prophets.

After they had been taken away into exile, the Jews realized how far they were from the Lord. Even in exile, some of God's people repented and turned back to the Lord. The word *repent* carries the idea of a radical change. Repentance is a change of understanding, creating a change of mind, leading to a change of heart, and culminating in a change of direction. The exiles came to the place where they understood what they were receiving from God was what God had promised. They said to themselves, "As the LORD of Hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so He has dealt with us." Then they trusted in the character of God enough to understand that, even after they were far from Him and though they had been carried away into captivity, He would return to them if they would repent and turn to Him. They recognized that the Lord had done with them exactly what He had planned and promised to do, and they could not question His purposes.

The Babylonian captives, who had experienced God's anger and who had, up to this point, rejected God's warnings, came to understand the truth of verse 3: "Return to Me . . . and I will return to you." Now, through Zechariah, God was reassuring those who had returned to Jerusalem, "I won't forget you. I won't reject you. I won't push you away. Return to Me." He tells us the same thing today. Our Lord has already given us the assurance that He will return to us when we turn to Him. Through the cross of Jesus Christ, God brings us to Himself and brings Himself to us.

When I'm driving and I'm depending on my GPS system, I've learned never to ignore one message it gives me: "Make a U-turn if possible." Has your GPS ever told you to do that? I like the fact that the voice always gives the caveat, "if possible." The GPS doesn't want me turning around in the middle of an interstate highway! But if I'm in a place where I can turn, the system warns me that I should turn.

When God tells His people, "Return to Me," He's not only saying that a U-turn is necessary in our lives, He's also saying the U-turn is possible. Through His grace and the power of Jesus Christ, we can repent and change direction. When our lives are directionally challenged, God commands us to return to Him. And He promises, when we return to Him, we will find that He is already turned toward us.

Reflect and Discuss

1. What are some of the factors or circumstances that can make believers feel far from God?
2. When we experience a sense that God is distant, what are some of the repercussions in our lives?
3. The people of Judah had stopped rebuilding the temple because of the opposition of the enemies. When you encounter spiritual opposition, how can you keep from quitting the work the Lord has called you to do?
4. Does God's righteous anger at our sin and rebellion draw His people back to Himself or repel us from Him? Why?
5. How is God's wrath against sin in your life compatible with His unfaltering love for you?
6. When you find yourself in God's "anger zone," what kinds of consequences do you experience? What can you do to get out of God's "anger zone"?
7. Explain how God's grace results in His strong warnings about judgment for sin.
8. How has God worked in your life to warn you when you were headed in the wrong direction?
9. What aspects of God's nature make repentance possible?
10. How does the gospel message speak to those who need to return to the Lord?