

Flying Scrolls and Women in Baskets?

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[0 : 00] and then you'll see what's just a slightly different sermon in some ways tonight. So let's pray. Father, we pray that you'd help us as we look at your word tonight, help us to understand it, help us to live faithfully in the light of it.

Father, please be at work amongst us. Please help us to be captivated by your word, led by it. And Father, please help us also to obey it.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Friends, I want to tell you that tonight we are about to enter into an unfamiliar world. The stuff we are going to look at tonight is not a story.

It's not narrative. It's not the stories of the Old Testament or the New Testament heroes or heroines. None of that sort of stuff. Nor is it like the book of Proverbs, you know, full of pithy wisdom about wise and foolish ways of living.

Not like that either. Nor is it like Job, which has a bit of story and a bit of poetry and a bit of argumentation. Nor is it like the Gospels. Nor is it like the argument of the epistles.

[1 : 06] You know, lots of heavy going argument, particularly if you get into Paul. No, this is not like that. This is weird stuff. It is very weird.

You'll see. It has echoes of Revelation. But if you thought Revelation is weird, you haven't seen weird yet. This stuff is really quite strange. There are horses with riders.

That's not so bad. But then women in flying baskets. And then massive flying scrolls. And then people called The Branch.

Stories about olive trees that are meant to be people or meant to represent people. On and on it goes. Now, my feeling is that those of us who inhabit the world of fantasy books or novels may have encountered something like it.

You know, the spectacular, the weird, the spooky, the sinister world with strange figures and bizarre events. You know, that world of fantasy literature. Some aspects of modern thrillers look a bit like it in places.

[2 : 08] Horror movies, well, yes, in places they might look a bit like what we're going to meet tonight. But the stuff we are going to see tonight is different from all of that. It looks somewhat, well, unconnected.

It doesn't appear to have a storyline. The stuff we're going to look at tonight is not neatly sort of tied together in a story. Even the book of Revelation appears to have some storyline that binds it together.

But not Zechariah 1 to 6. I tell you what, this is the longest sermon I've taken preparing for a long, long time. It was hard stuff.

You see, these chapters are different. So to understand it a bit, I'm going to do two things. First, I'm going to give you some background information so that we can set the story into its context.

And second, I'm going to take a totally different approach tonight to preaching this passage with the help of my beautiful assistant. Okay, let's get underway.

[3 : 07] The first thing to understand is the immediate history of this book. You see, in the book of Deuteronomy, we find God's people on the edge of the promised land, the land God had promised to give them.

God told them that he had rules about how they were to behave when they entered into the land. These rules were based on the covenant he had entered into with them and that they had both entered into, that is Israel and he had entered into willingly.

God told them, if you keep the covenant, then I'll be your God. You'll be my people. Everything will be all right. You'll be blessed. Everything will be fine.

I would dwell among you. Then he let them build a temple to signify that he did dwell among them. In Deuteronomy, he also told them that if they didn't keep the covenant, then he would punish them by removing them from the land and the covenant curses would fall upon them.

Anyway, you know, don't you? They didn't keep the covenant. And sure enough, the covenant curses fell upon them. God brought a foreign nation to defeat them in battle.

[4 : 12] The foreign nation was Babylon. The Babylonians killed their king, leveled their city to the ground, destroyed their temple. Israel was carted off into exile for 70 years.

Anyway, while they were in exile, God had mercy on them and he forgave them. As he'd done time and time in the past. He did yet again. He relented concerning the judgment that he would send and he forgave them.

He promised they'd return from exile after the 70 years had passed. He promised them that he would dwell among them again. He indicated that the temple would be the way that you knew that was going to be the case.

He gave them many grand promises as to what things would look like when they got back there. Anyway, in 539 BC, Babylon was defeated.

The Persian king of the day, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They rebuilt their temple. The date we're looking at for the book of Zechariah is 520 BC, about 17, 18 years after they returned.

[5 : 17] Jews are back in Jerusalem. There's still a shell of a city. It still looks a bit like a pile of rubble in places. Jews are there back there, though, and they're keen to rebuild their temple as a symbol of their relationship with God.

That's the background to our book. Now, last week, we looked at the first six verses of this book, and this week, we're going to look at six chapters. So, you know, we're going to have to move. So we're going to have to find some creative way of doing this. These chapters are nearly all. Well, they're nearly all comprised of visions. Now, Zechariah's visions are somewhat special when you compare them to the visions of every other prophet, just about.

Like Daniel and Ezekiel, his visions have angelic messengers. But in Zechariah, the messengers present themselves to be questioned and guide Zechariah through the vision by, you know, them having a little dialogue together.

However, the vision plus the questions plus the explanation make up a thing that's called the word of the Lord. That is, together they are the word of the Lord to his people. It seems as though all the visions are going to look at, that we're going to look at, happened on, it must have been a pretty awful night for him, one night.

[6 : 30] Six chapters of visions, one night, or perhaps one day. They happened three months after the very first prophecy that we looked at last week. More importantly, it's about five months after Zerubbabel, the sort of Davidic representative, began his rebuilding of the temple.

Anyway, that's background. Now, let me tell you how we're going to look at the content of these visions. You need to stay with me tonight because it's exciting stuff if you understand it. I've set up an entirely fictitious situation.

Okay, just out of my idle brain last night. I want you to imagine for a moment that Zechariah and his wife are at the equivalent of an ancient breakfast table.

Okay, you know, he's had a very bad night. And anyway, sitting down at the table in the morning, and Zechariah's wife explains that he had kept her awake all night.

You know, there'd been groanings, tossing, turning. There'd been shouting. There's been his getting up and down, trying to get some sleep intermittently between visions. He'd been talking to people that she didn't think were in the house at all.

[7 : 39] And Zechariah explains to his wife that he had a night full of visions. He's not sure that he knows what they mean. And yet, and so he tells her, look, let's work through them together.

And he says, go through them one by one, and I'll tell you what I remember. And so I want you to listen to Zechariah and his wife and their conversation. And I'll have that bag of books.

Thank you. Oops. We all right? Do you want to change? Oh.

How are we going? Is that all right? Have you got sound? Everyone all right? Good. All right. I haven't even given my wife a name. Perhaps you, but we'll call her Heather just for short, you know. And not a very Hebrew name, is it? It's in Andrew's notes, though, so it must be right. Okay. All right. Let's get underway. So I'm going to be quizzed by my wife. That was a pretty bad night last

night, Zach.

[8 : 43] Why don't you just look? You know, I know it was torrid, but I want you to tell me exactly what you saw. Okay. Well, in my first vision, by the way, friend, you might want to follow us in your Bibles, if you like.

In my first vision, I saw a man riding on a red horse. And he was standing in the midst of myrtle trees with different coloured horses behind him. So did you say anything to him?

Well, yes, I did. I wanted to know what they were all about, so I asked, what are these, my lord? And in response, the man on horseback, well, he gave me this long response how they'd been patrolling the earth, and they found it all at peace.

So what's so special about that? Well, the thing that struck me about it is that the man on horseback spoke, and the angel of the Lord seemed to think that peace was not a good thing for the earth to have.

In fact, it seemed as though he was upset at the idea of the earth being at peace. And I can only assume that that is because God had previously said that after 70 years, he would punish the nations for what they did to his people.

[9 : 57] In other words, there would be no peace. Now, I can understand that, but, well, it's only a short time ago, my fellow prophet Haggai had prophesied that God would shake the heavens and the earth, and overthrow the throne of the kingdoms.

But, however, God spoke some comforting words to my angel, and my angel told me to proclaim a number of things. You can see them there in my prophecy. The Lord is indeed committed to the city and his purposes.

The Lord is indeed angry at the complacency of the nations. The Lord will indeed fulfill his promises for Jerusalem and his people. So you're the prophet.

Can you summarize exactly what God's word to us is in this vision? I could give it a shot. God is saying that he's still committed to us Jews.

He is still for us. He will still punish the nations. He'll still bless us and put his promises into effect. The key to that is Jerusalem's renewal and recovery.

[11 : 03] That's the key to the future of the world. If Jerusalem gets back on track and gets recovered and so on, that's the key to the future. Yeah, but what difference is it going to make? Well, it means that God's kingdom is going ahead according to God's plan.

That's both good news and bad news, of course. It's good news for those who line up with God's kingdom. It's bad news for those who have their own kingdom set against God's kingdom, because that will be the end for them.

Okay, well, that's the first one. But you were going all night. So let's have the second one now.

What did you see in the second one? No horses. This time I saw four horns.

Four horns. And what did you ask the angel about this one? Well, I asked the obvious question.

Now, as you know, horns are symbols of power and rule.

So I had two questions, really. First, I said, who or what do these horns represent? And second, I asked, what are these horns coming to do?

[12 : 05] And what did he say back? What struck you about what he said? Well, the answer I got to the first question was quite straightforward, really. The horses represent the powers that cause such mayhem amongst God's people.

That is the past powers. However, the answer I got to the second question seemed a little strange to me. He said, as I said, horns are symbols of power. But the Lord started speaking of blacksmiths. Now, I think he actually meant craftsman. I mean, it's the sort of word that we would use for the guys we've got building the temple.

You know, craftsmen. Sort of lowly guys, you know, who just build things. So what did you learn?

Well, in the cool light of day, I think I learned this.

I think that God is saying that although the nations around about us are still strong and mighty, they surround us on every side, the work we're doing here in Jerusalem, building this what looks like pretty puny little temple, is actually much more significant.

[13 : 17] You see, the work our craftsmen are doing in rebuilding the temple is the work of God and far more significant than the powers represented by the horses, by the horns.

This work is the work of the kingdom of God. And human kingdoms cannot stand in the way of the kingdom of God. So it looks puny work done by a bunch of craftsmen.

However, this work should terrify the nations. They should be shaking in their boots. After all, we are doing God's work, building God's kingdom.

And friends, I just want to take a little breather here and just give you some reflections from Andrew, the 21st century pastor. You see, I think what happens here, what we get in this picture here, has very great significance for us if we're Christians.

You see, sometimes gospel work, you know, sharing the gospel with people, building people up in their faith, teaching them the Bible, really looks so insignificant in a very powerful world, doesn't it? [14:24] However, it's not. Our world is a world full of information. You know that. You are the people, most of you, who have inherited the internet. A world that is a mass of information.

Politicians, and in that world of information, the Christian gospel looks so tiny. However, it is not. In our world, politicians look so significant, don't they?

They are prepared by powerful people and page speech makers. And I labour at preparing a sermon that grapples with an ancient text that most people think is irrelevant. And to me, it looks weak and powerless.

But it is not. You see, it is doing the work of God's kingdom, and God's kingdom is the only thing that counts. So do you know what? Those four horns, those four powers, those great ancient world powers, were far less significant than four craftsmen, four workmen, working on an ancient building, building a temple.

Anyway, let's return to Zechariah and his wife. Okay, so we've had the first two visions. What did you see next? Well, I saw another man this time. However, he wasn't on horseback.

[15:42] Instead, he had a measuring line in his hand. So a different one. What did you ask him this time? Well, this time, I didn't ask the angel anything. You see, instead, I talked to the young man who was carrying around the measuring line, and I asked the obvious question.

In other words, I inquired, where are you off to with that measuring line? And by implication, I was asking him, what is it you're going to measure? His response was that he was going off to measure Jerusalem.

And my guess, he was measuring Jerusalem in preparation for building in it. Now, as I reflect on this, it seems to me that this man was just like in Ezekiel. Perhaps you might remember that Ezekiel saw a man with a measuring line too who was measuring Jerusalem and the temple.

So what struck you about this one? Well, just after I asked the question, some other things happened. First of all, my angel was joined by another angel.

And this new angel told my angel to rush off after the young man. And he was to tell him that Jerusalem is to be inhabited and that it wouldn't need any walls because it would have so many people in it and that God would have be a wall of protection around it, a wall of fire.

[16:58] But he also added another element to it. As you know, lots of exiles haven't returned from Babylon yet. But God's presence and God's protection should be an encouragement to them.

So a call was issued to them. Flee from Babylon. Come to Jerusalem. Like Abraham, get out of there and come to the land of promise.

Return to Jerusalem because that's where God's future is. There many nations will join themselves to the Lord on that day. They shall be his people and he'll dwell in their midst.

Okay. I'm a just a slow, simple woman. So I want you to summarize what you learned. Well, in one sense, I didn't learn anything new.

After all, the promises I heard about are just old promises. But I did learn that God is repeating them. God is committed to his future, you see, and his future is tied up with his people.

[17:54] It's tied up with people from other nations as well. And together with his people and with the other nations drawn in, he's going to dwell among all humanity.

He will be their God. They will be his people. God's word has not failed. It will not fail. God's purposes in his world are going ahead. God's purpose in his world. Okay. So that's three visions. But the night was long and there was a lot of anguish happening. So what did you see next? Well, this vision that I saw next was different from all the others.

This fourth vision, well, for a start, I couldn't tell you whether what I was seeing was a continuation of the previous one or a new one. I was shown something by an angel, but it was very different.

Second, I didn't ask a question this time. So what were you shown? Well, my messenger showed me our high priest. You know who he is, Joshua. He was in the presence of two persons.

[18 : 53] And on one hand, he stood before the angel of the Lord, whom I'd seen in my earlier visions. But on the other hand, Satan stood at his right hand in order to accuse him. And Joshua didn't have any of the robes of priesthood on.

Good grief. He's meant to be our mediator. Well, he was dressed in filthy clothes. He's meant to represent us before God. How can he do that like that? Well, that's the very thing I felt.

What was going on here? And Satan's presence gave the very impression that he might be there to accuse him of this very thing, saying, what right have you got dressed as you are, so unclean, to be conducting, you know, things in the temple of God.

But then the most spectacular thing happened. You see, first, the Lord declared him to be a saved man. He said, you're a man plucked from the fire. Second, the Lord rebuked the Satan standing next to him.

Third, the angel of the Lord ordered a whole new set of priestly garments, took away his sin, and stood by him. And then the angel of the Lord spoke to Joshua, our high priest.

[20 : 00] And he said to him and his fellow priests to live up to their expectations, God's expectations, and be godly. And then he began to talk about high priests in the future. And he named the high priest of the future as my servant, and then he named someone else called the branch.

And that branch will be deeply connected to the removal of our guilt and our punishment. So we've got a branch and forgiveness. I've heard that sort of stuff in the prophets before, but not usually together.

So can you tell us what the combination means? I think there are some very deep things going on here. The language of the branch is connected with a Davidic king, someone descended from David, the ancestor.

And the language of branch, sorry, the language of branch is connected with Davidic king, and the language of forgiveness has always been connected with priests. So you've got two things going on here. Someone connected with forgiveness, someone connected with being a king.

Now when you add the language of that day, which is always referred to a future coming day, you've got a pretty big picture of forgiveness of sins, a legitimate and clean high priesthood, and a Davidic king, and all bundled into one.

[21 : 19] It's the fulfillment of what Jeremiah promised in chapter 33 of his book. A branch from David, who rules in justice and righteousness, legitimate and clean priesthood, restored fortunes of the people and of Jerusalem, cleansing from the guilt of sin, and living in the land in safety and security.

In other words, it's as though all the promises of God are being fulfilled in these two characters. It's almost as though all the problems have been solved, and we're back in Eden again, living with God, living in security and peace with God.

That's what we've got to look for, and look, to tell the truth, that's what we Jews have been waiting for for so long. I sure hope it's soon. By the way, there's one thing that I'm puzzled about, or by. I think that there may be an answer to it in the word from God I tell you about later, but the thing that puzzles me is that Zerubbabel, our Davidic descendant, who's in our midst, he's not identified as being the branch here.

Very strange. I'm not sure. It makes me wonder who the branch is. I'm beginning to think Zerubbabel is not. However, let's move on, and we can come back to this later.

[22 : 42] So the next vision, what did you see then? Well, we reverted back to the normal pattern, you know, seeing things and being questioned, and my angel was back urging me to pay attention, and I saw a lampstand of gold with a bowl and seven lamps and all that stuff, and then I noticed that by the bowl there were two olive trees, one on each side.

So what did the angel say these were about? Well, I quizzed him about it, and after, you see, I'd been quite confused about it, so I didn't bother feigning that I had, well, that I was short of a bit of knowledge about this.

I just acted dumb, and I said, what are these, my Lord? And perhaps I shouldn't have acted so dumb because the angel just made it seem worse.

He said to me, don't you know what these things are? And I told him again, no, my Lord, I don't. And later, I asked him a third time, however, since then, I think I've worked it out.

The angel gave me a clue when he said that they are two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of all the earth. Now, I think they are the two anointed ones referred to later in the vision.

[23 : 58] That is, I think they're the Davidic descendant, Zerubbabel, and the second is the high priest, Joshua. And just as olive trees nourish and strengthen the lampstands of oil, that is, give them oil that they can be, that can be in the lampstands, so is Zerubbabel, and Joshua, nourish and strengthen the community in Israel.

That is, the priest and the Davidic descendant. So they're like olive trees in the vision. That in mind, let me go back to the vision. You see, the very next thing that happens is that I receive this incredible word of the Lord to convey to Zerubbabel.

God tells me, go and tell Zerubbabel this, not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord. Now the previous visions had clearly indicated that God was building his kingdom again. And now, these words are still ringing in my brain. They are these, not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

I've been thinking about this a real lot. First, why does Zerubbabel in particular get this word from God? Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

[25 : 13] Well, in the end, I don't really know. However, I know what he is being told by God. God is telling him that what will be accomplished here in Israel will not be accomplished by roability.

It'll be accomplished in and through God and God alone. In other words, it'll be accomplished by divine intervention by the spirit of God and by God alone. So that was a pretty long explanation. Can you summarize it for me? Yeah, I've learned lots. But in particular, I've learned not to look upon humans and upon human ability to accomplish God's work.

No, we should look to God. It's not our leaders, no matter who they are, who will bring in the kingdom of God. It is God himself. And the psalmist knew that.

After all, in Psalm 33, acknowledges that the heavens and the earth and the sea are all made by the command and the word of God. God made everything and God observes anything. And in the end, a king is not saved by his great army.

[26 : 15] A worker is not delivered by his great strength. A war horse is a vain hope for victory. No, our hope must only be in God. He alone can be our source of hope, steadfast love and deliverance.

So, with Zerubbabel and everyone else who wants to see God's kingdom grow, don't trust in human beings, but trust in God. Now, I want to just take a little break here and do some more 21st century pastor stuff.

So, I wonder if we could, I want to talk to you just about some very important things such as the contents of my bookshelf at home. Okay?

That's this. Above my desk at the moment, I have a little shelf just off to the left that is of all the books I'm going to read that I think would help me in my ministry. I'm going to read you some of the titles of them.

Okay? And you might think it's boring, but you'll see why in a moment. So, here they are. This one's called Skillful Shepherds, all about being a pastor.

[27 : 21] This one's called Trellis and the Vine, how to make people, you know, active in ministry. This one's called Sticky Church.

You might like to have a look at that one later on, see what it's all about, but it's about how to run a good church, basically. This one's called Sticky Teams. This is how to run your stuff in a large church.

This one is by a man called Mark Dever, and it's called What is a Healthy Church? Okay? This one is called, by the same man, Nine Marks of a Healthy Church.

These are all really interesting books. They tell you, you know, how to make a, really, how to really run a church well, and what a good church looks like. This one, Jim Belcher, is called Deep Church, A Third Way Beyond the Emerging and Traditional Church.

Some of you will be very bored by all of these books, but let me tell you, they are standard books for many pastors. This one is called The Coming Church Revolution. This one's called The Myth of the 200 Barrier, that is, some churches stop growing before they get to 200.

[28 : 34] How do you get past it? This one's called Church Planter. This one, I love the title. This is about a church where it's got young people moving into it, and the old people are feeling disenfranchised, and it's called Who Stole My Church?

Which is the story of how things are going. Now, I better not go for too much longer. You can't find the one you wanted. No, I want all of them. Oh, the other one, yeah, there's one that's not here that I'll tell them about. This one's Planting Growing Churches.

This one's called Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them, and I think we'll stop there. You get the general feel for it? Okay? Thank you.

Not only a beautiful assistant, but a very able one as well. Now, these books are all related to ministry. They'd be helpful books for me to read, and I'm sure they're all informative and useful. However, let me tell you, they are largely read by people wanting to be successful in ministry just as the people who wrote them are. Now, I know many of the people who wrote them are godly and prayerful leaders.

[29 : 45] I know that. And I know many of the people who read them are godly and prayerful leaders wanting things for God and His Kingdom. Many of them are also very able people and their raw skill is enormous.

I have friends planting churches who are incredibly able people. But, you know what? I think that perhaps the most important book is the one that's not here tonight because it's sitting in a different place because I'm reading it at the moment because I think it's perhaps the most important one. Do you know what it's called? It's called The Praying Life because I suspect that's what really I need to be doing the most because it's not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord, and that that's what I ought to be doing.

See what, why do I think that's the most important? It's most important but because God does not stress, because it does not, because it's all about God.

That's why it's so important. And surely in the building of the Kingdom of God it is God to whom I must turn. So I need to learn how to turn to Him, to pray, to seek His ways.

[31 : 01] He alone will bring in His Kingdom, not my skills, not me, not techniques, but He. Okay, let's turn to Zechariah's, sorry, back to Zechariah's kitchen table and let's return to our conversation.

I'm sorry, this is taking a little while but we need to do this to get through it. Okay? So, how many visions have we had now? I think we've had five. I think that's right.

Yeah. So tell me about the next one because there was still a few more. Well, we're going to we're going to sort of skip through them now. Six, seven and eight all together. That sounds like a good idea.

Okay. The bus is about to leave. So let me put them together. Vision one, vision six, I saw a massive flying scroll. In the seventh, I saw this huge basket or a measuring container with a woman sitting in it.

My messenger explained both of them in this way. the massive flying scroll had covenant curses written on it. The two that were highlighted were the were stealing and swearing of false oaths and God promised judgment on people who did it.

[32 : 13] As for the measuring container, my angel identified the woman as wickedness. That was her name. My angel shoved her, it was really interesting, shoved her back in the basket, closed the lid and sent her off to Babylon where she belongs.

Then the final vision is somewhat similar to the first vision. There were some horses again with war wagons or you might call them chariots. They came out of two mountains which probably represented the very presence of God.

My angel explained they were the four winds of heaven going out into the whole earth. The horse and the chariot going north which is where the enemies of God traditionally come from, established peace.

Okay, so they're the three last visions. So what do you reckon God wants us to learn from those three? Well, I reckon the scrolls, those huge flying scrolls, represent the authority of God's word. When it sweeps over the face of the earth, God is telling us that his covenant word is searching us out and we will be measured by it. The basket with wickedness in it indicates God is taking wickedness away from the land and placing it where it belongs in Babylon which is destined for destruction.

[33 : 31] The horses and their chariots indicate God's establishing peace or will establish cosmic peace. In particular, God is establishing peace by establishing his rule in the north which has been the main threat to Israel through most of its life.

[39 : 23] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.