

Learning Lessons from the Past

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please turn with me first of all to Zechariah, the book of Zechariah. It's going to be on the screen, but if you have your own Bibles, you'll know that's towards the end of the Old Testament.

The book of Zechariah very much is a book in tandem with the book of Haggai. Haggai the prophet encouraging the exiles to rebuild the temple.

So Zechariah is more concerned with the people there back in Jerusalem to repent and to return to the Lord their God.

And over these next few weeks, maybe even a few months, I hope to explore some of the passages in Zechariah, which although written 2,500 years ago, I think, have very much relevance for us today.

So we're going to read the first six verses of Zechariah. In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Edo, saying, The Lord was very angry with your fathers.

[1 : 1 7] Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts, Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, And I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds. But they did not heed, Sorry, hear or pay attention to me, declares the Lord.

Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, Do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants, the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?

So they repented and said, As the Lord of hosts proposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so has he dealt with us.

And then in Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 15, the first seven verses, we've been reading there in Zechariah, the call to the people to return to God in repentance.

[2 : 2 6] Let's read now again that theme of repentance. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, to hear Jesus.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, who has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.

Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons persons who need no repentance.

And may God add his blessing to that, or these readings from his holy word. The theme that we see in the first six verses of Zechariah 1, this theme of learning lessons from the past, the lessons that God gives to us, even from the past, whether it be our own past, our nation's past, the past and history, given to us to learn, to grow, and to deepen our faith and trust in him.

[3 : 56] And three aspects to that learning from the past that I want to focus with you this, well, yes, this late afternoon hour. We need to set the scene. I mean, after all in the passage itself, we're given a scene to set, we're given the background to the prophecy of, or the prophecies of Zechariah.

And these prophecies very much emphasizing the need to learn from the past. And in that learning from the past, the Lord's people being challenged, challenged to deepen our faithfulness in God, the Lord, to grow in grace and to grow in that faithful service and obedience to his name.

Learning lessons from the past. And yet, we live in an age, we live in a time when the past is considered, well, just that, just considered past.

Irrelevant, irrelevant to the modern day mindset that says that it's all that counts is now, all that counts is the present. And let's just confine the past to the dustbin of history.

And there's a phrase that's often used to express that kind of thinking that just ignores the past or wants to ignore the past. We use the expression of chronological snobbery.

[5 : 18] In other words, saying, you know, we don't need to learn from the past. Past is just, you know, past, forgotten about. We don't need to live in the light of what's happened in years gone by.

That mindset, that thinking that says that the past is irrelevant. You can see where that kind of thinking comes from. I mean, we live in an age when we've got instant knowledge just at the press of a button.

We can access knowledge immediately and access it for our own good and so we think. We live in a touchscreen world that thinks as if, or gets us to think about the present and the immediate and forgets the past.

What about the Bible? When the Bible written these thousands of years ago, so many seeing it as irrelevant to today's society. The Bible seemed just to be a collection of books of ancient history with ancient people, ancient priests, ancient prophets, ancient words, ancient rules.

Just again, ancient. That's been considered irrelevant to today's society. But that kind of thinking is utterly wrong.

[6 : 41] Utterly wrong. I mean, even in a, we might say, a logical sense. We're all products of the past. We're all shaped by our past, a past that impacts our present.

Of course, in a spiritual context, you who know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, you know salvation because of what happened in the past, because of what happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus gave his life for you.

And of course, even thinking of your salvation, I mean, chosen from all eternity, even beyond the confines of time itself. You are in Christ because of the coming of the Lord Jesus to earth 2,000 years ago.

And that, in the eternal plan and purposes of God, as I say, that transcends time itself. And as far as these so-called ancient prophets, ancient priests, ancient kings, ancient peoples, ancient books are concerned, well, what we find in God's Word, what we find in the Bible, wasn't just written for that particular time when these books were written.

God's Word, the Bible, these 66 books are given for all ages and they're given for a present-day application. These were people whom we read off in the past in the Bible to whom God spoke.

[8 : 11] They lived in the presence of Almighty God as you and as I live in that same presence. And yes, times may have changed over all these centuries, but human nature doesn't change.

And so what we read in Scripture, what we see in Scripture is utterly relevant for today and for all days, for all ages. You might be thinking then, well, what's all this got to do with the passage that we read in Zechariah 1 to 6?

Well, surely quite a number of things. I mean, first of all, this is an Old Testament book. This was a book written in the past but with a present application as I trust we'll see as we go through certainly a great portion of this book.

As we said, written some two and a half thousand years ago. It's written at a time when the temple in Jerusalem was being rebuilt. The people had returned from exile. God and His wisdom two and a half thousand years ago breathing out His Word, breathing out His message to this prophet Zechariah.

I suppose it's maybe not a book that we immediately tend to turn to. I think this is, I've preached a few times in Zechariah over these, what am I, 16 years in ministry.

[9 : 31] So I suppose it's not a book that we, you know, are constantly reading but this is the Word of God. This is one of the 66 books of Scripture. And so it's for us to read and to apply, to learn from.

And to know that this is what God has given even for us, even at this present time. I mean, Zechariah the prophet, yes, he was given God's Word to give to the returning exiles.

But it's words that contain lessons from the past for a present application. So, God willing, as we go through this book and all the number of, I don't know how many lords the evenings will take to go through this book, but I pray that we'll see the ultimate relevance of what this book, this book of Zechariah is showing.

That ultimately this book points us to the Lord Jesus. So we're not going to ignore this, this longest of what's called the minor prophets.

Minor, not minor in terms of importance, minor in terms of length. You know, you've got the major prophets, the long prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. This is one of the minor prophets, the longest book, the minor prophets, but we're not going to ignore it because it's with all Scripture.

[10 : 51] This is God breathed. You know, we read this morning in 2 Timothy 3, we read towards the end of that chapter and you can see that the book of Zechariah is included in what Paul wrote to Timothy when Paul said that all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

And we can apply that truth, yes, to this book of Zechariah because there are words here to reprove each one of us. There are words in this passage to correct wrong thinking.

There are words here in this passage that are going to train you and train me in righteous living so that we're enabled to live, live for the Lord and work works of righteousness for his name's sake.

So what do we find here then? Well, we see first of all the setting, the scene. You see the scene that set in the eighth month and the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berachiah, the son of Edou.

Whatever portion of scripture we're reading, it's always important to get the context, to get the background, the background to the message that God gives to his people. And context here helps us to understand why this particular word was given to the Lord's people at this particular time.

[12 : 29] And, well, right at the start of this book we get the context. We get the time that this prophecy was given. We're given the political situation. When the prophecy was given and indeed when or who this prophet was, it's all got importance.

These opening words help us to understand where this book is taking us. Well, what do we learn? Well, we learn that this prophecy was given when King Darius was in power.

Who was King Darius? He was King of Persia. He was King of that superpower that ruled, well, ruled much of the Middle East two and a half thousand years ago. And included in that control of the King of Persia was the land of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem.

Twenty years before this prophecy of Zechariah, the exiles had been permitted to return to their homeland under another king, King Cyrus. Jerusalem was still under the control of the Persian Empire, but the people had been free, free to go back to their homeland and rebuild their lives or even rebuild the temple.

But twenty years after their return, the temple, well, the foundations were laid, but there was no temple built construction on that foundation. Twenty years after the return of the exiles, the foundation, all they could see were the foundations.

[14 : 02] We're told that in the accompanying prophecy, the prophecy of Haggai. But now it's Darius who's King and he's King under the sovereign permission of God the Lord.

God's going to send his prophets to speak to the people at that particular time, to speak to the people in their particular circumstances and in many ways their depressed circumstances.

So God sends Haggai, God sends Zechariah and he sends these prophets to rouse the people, well, to rouse them out of their complacency and really to start building their lives according to God's purposes, God's plan.

Haggai is going to speak to the people as we said, to encourage them to rebuild the temple. Zechariah is going to say much more to the people than Haggai does.

And, well, we're told something more about Zechariah here. We're given a wee bit of his genealogy. We're given the name of his predecessors and we can actually work out from other parts of Scripture that this was a priestly family.

[15 : 08] So, Zechariah is a prophet, he's a priest and he's ultimately going to point to the one who's prophet, priest, and king. By his prophecy he's going to show us the fulfillment of much of what Zechariah says, the fulfillment of these words.

He's going to point us to the Lord Jesus. Bring this to our own time. We're living in a particular period of time when, well, we can identify in some ways with the people there returning to Jerusalem.

Because look at what's happening there. The people have returned to Jerusalem. They still don't have any, you know, real independence. They're still conquered. They're still a conquered people.

People that are still under another rule. But they've been given a freedom to regain their, if you like, their way of life. But that freedom needs to be encouraged and to be encouraged from the very word of God given to them by the prophets.

Now bring this to ourselves today. It's for you and for me to be continually encouraged by God's word. To recognize that God has given us even in this current day and age freedoms.

[16 : 24] Freedoms to build our lives according to God's word. We're shown we've been directed by that word. We've been shown even by the Lord Jesus how we're to live for him.

How we're to show that we truly are his people and doing it in the freedoms that God has given us. Yes, we're under, if you like, a rule that doesn't know the Lord as Savior.

We're living under political leaders who have no love for the Lord. But we're still given particular freedoms that we can still worship God in a building such as this.

We can still proclaim God through the media. We can still utter the gospel in a land that seems so much to discredit God's word.

But still, we need that encouragement from God's word to stir us up. For God's word to stir me up, to stir you up in service and obedience to do as well.

[17 : 24] And that stirring up of ourselves as believers is so often given in the light of lessons from the past.

Being given these lessons from the past to build on, to build on now. As the case was for the people there in Jerusalem. That's what we read there in verse 2 to verse 6.

They're being given lessons from the past to build on so that they show their faithfulness to God. And this message is given to Zechariah the prophet. Now what was a prophet?

A prophet was someone who spoke forth the word of God. He's God's messenger. You know, we think of a prophet as somebody who simply, you know, talks about or tells what's going to happen in the future.

But no, certainly that was part of the work of a prophet. But a prophet was God's messenger. Given the word from God to give to the people.

[18 : 26] And the prophet spoke of things in the past as well as things still to come. And he spoke messages from God to give the people encouragement, relevance for their own lives and circumstances.

And you see that here in the word that God gave Zechariah. God giving Zechariah a word to give to the people in Jerusalem at their particular circumstance. And notice when you read there from verse 2.

Zechariah doesn't soften the word that God gave to him to give to the people. Zechariah doesn't couch God's word in a language that somehow the people aren't going to be offended at.

Jeremiah gives what God had given him even when these words might sound strong and direct. You know listen to the words that God gave to Zechariah.

The Lord was very angry with your fathers now. You know there's a direct word of truth but it's a strong word. The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them thus declares the Lord of hosts return to me says the Lord of hosts.

[19 : 37] You hear that refrain again and again the Lord of hosts the Lord of armies the Lord of power and the Lord of power telling the people return to me again it's direct it's strong and they seem don't be like your fathers to whom the former prophets cried out don't be like those who listen or wouldn't listen maybe heard the word but didn't listen and didn't obey the word that God gave them.

Thus says the Lord of hosts return from your evil ways even that expression your evil ways that's not soft language that's not language that's given to let the people think that they're fine I mean these are really abrupt words but these are words given to the people to get straight to the point yes talking about the people of previous generations but also included in that word is word given to present generation because Zechariah is teaching the people not to be like their fathers their forefathers from the past see God's anger against previous generations what happened it led to their punishment it led to their being exiled it happened some 70 years before but the implication of what happened in the past is for the present generation to consider because the present generation had to learn from the past they were of the same nation the same people but more importantly the same human nature and the real danger was that the present generation there in

Jerusalem would just descend into the former ways of the previous generations and incur God's wrath so what do we find?

We find God in his mercy he sends Zechariah he gives the people a warning a warning for their own good return to me says the Lord and I will return to you now in one sense the people had returned to the Lord they'd left Babylon they left that immediate immediately being under Persian rule I mean so many of them had actually had a good living in the Persian Empire and in many ways it was a sacrifice for them to uproot themselves from the Babylonian Empire the Persian Empire rather and to go back to Jerusalem and as it were start all over again but well they'd physically returned from exile their hearts hadn't fully returned to God they were spiritually complacent spiritually lazy and they were so prone to slip back into their evil ways and they've got to hear the word of the Lord they've got to listen to that command to return to him and in their returning to him

God promises he'll be gracious to them so the people must learn from the past learn a very important message that if they don't return to God God's going to withhold his blessing from them and that was two and a half thousand years ago but what about now what about you what about me what about the church what about the Lord's people now now I suppose we can bring this to an immediate application we've been returning physically to the building you know we worship here for so many years we're returning to some kind of normality we've had the sacrament of baptism the first one in two years here in the building we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper next Lord's Day children's work is beginning again now got three services a week home visits have started continued anyway church life's getting back to some kind of regularity so in many ways we are returning to what we once were but have you returned to God with all your heart have you learned the lessons that

[23 : 54] God has given us even in these past 18 months these 18 months when things certainly haven't been very normal are you resolved am I resolved are we fully resolved to return fully to God to return to him giving him that due honour and glory to his name have we resolved to loosen our love for the world and the more to be Christ like to love him to serve him with all our heart we do have to learn from the lessons that God has given us even in the immediate past but at the same time we're not to be locked in the past yes we learn from the past we can learn from our past mistakes we can learn but we learn not to remain rooted in the past but to act in what we've learned for our present purposes and yes for the future now is the moment we're living in the now

God's placed you to serve him now and this is what we find here in Zechariah this emphasis on present reality it's what Zechariah tells them in verse 5 your fathers where are they and the prophets do they live forever in other words those of our previous generation where were they now they were gone they were gone they'd passed on they'd passed away a new generation had come and it was for the new generation to obey God to respond to God now to return to him because even for that present generation that we read of here in Zechariah whom Zechariah gave the word of God to that generation itself passed away and we pray that they did not waste that opportunity to return to the Lord you know we're only on this earth for a short time and for many of us the older we get it seems the faster the pace and the passage of time but remember the message that God gives the word of God endures forever and that message is given for you and for me to obey and to remain steadfast and continually and to have done with lesser things and respond to what

God gives to you by his word respond now because now is the accepted time now is the time yes look back even look back and see the hand of God instructing you even in times past but learn from that lesson and act upon that now but if you haven't given your life to the Lord Jesus again you're in the present now now is the time to do so you don't know what tomorrow is going to bring you know in the past week many of us were shocked at the passing of a former employee at the free church offices she was suddenly taken she had no warning at all neither did any of us have that warning whether we're a believer or not and so make the most of every opportunity that God gives you to return to him even to come back to him in true repentance of heart like the prodigal returning to the father today is given but tomorrow is not guaranteed listen to the word that Moses wrote in

Psalm 90 the years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80 yet their span is but toil and trouble they're soon gone and we fly away nothing more than being reminded of the brevity of life but there's everything everything to remember and consider when we're reminded that our days are few and yes we have to number our days to gain that heart of wisdom because the passage of time is moving it's moving on and moving on relentlessly I was certainly made very aware of that just last weekend when I was up in Skye we left Skye almost 20 years ago and I saw people last weekend I hadn't seen for almost 20 years and certainly the passage of time certainly was very evident and them seeing me and me seeing them people whom

I'd known in their 50s now in their 70s and I suppose we can do the sums for every other age of people that I knew all these years ago but just before we left Portree I popped into the cemetery and it brought home to me in a really vivid way when I saw headstones of people whom I knew so well and the hand of death taking them and that brought home the brevity of life the true brevity of life and the importance and the life and the breath that God gives us now to turn to him to return to him because we're living in a present reality and in that present reality there's a present necessity to turn to God to repent of our former race because so many of us have to repent of former ways of disobedience and to return to God and to remain faithful to him and that's a challenge that Zechariah gives us here in this last section verse 6 a challenge to faithfulness where we read in verse 6 but my words and my statutes which I commanded my servants the prophets did they not overtake your fathers so they repented and said as the

[29 : 59] Lord of hosts purpose to deal with us for our ways and deeds so has he dealt with us in other words God had given warnings to his people before they went into exile but these people these previous generations to the generation Zechariah is speaking to these previous generations well at first they didn't listen they ignored God's warnings and as a result of God's warnings God sends his people into exile the poetic way of putting it here God's word and statutes did they not overtake your fathers the imagery is of a chasing animal chasing another animal and then capturing it catching it it's as if we're reading here that it's where God's hand pursuing these previous generations and catching them catching them and punishing them and the people have been sent into exile and it's only in exile that the people come to their senses and they repent of their sins against

God the people saw the destruction of Jerusalem they saw the temple ruined they saw themselves being carried away and they repented but they repented too late to save Jerusalem they repented too late to save themselves from exile but for the present generation of people that Zechariah is giving God's word to it wasn't too late they're being given this new hope they're being spoken to according to the mercy of God that if they would just learn from the past recommit to the Lord they'll know the blessing of God so the people there they've been encouraged to move forward in faith and to move forward in faithfulness and to show it by a daily walk with God a daily repentance a daily commitment to do God's will now bring this again to the present is there true repentance in your heart such that there's joy in heaven over one sinner who repents are you drawing near to God in faith are you submitting to him fully that's what we read in the book of James the epistle of James where James speaks of humbling yourself before God and he'll exalt you well isn't that a call a command even to this day to humble yourselves before God and he'll exalt you are you being faithful to the word of God and being humble especially in the context of the brevity of life because none of us can presume on

God's continued mercies so it's for each one of us to even through what we've even heard this evening to remain faithful to God and yes to be resolved in your heart to follow the saviour you've been given that task to serve a risen saviour and do it know the joy of the Lord in serving him and do it as you move forward in faith as you move forward in faithfulness as you count the days that God has given you to live for him to return to him and to be his servant even in this day that God has given us Amen let us pray our Lord our time is short you rule from all eternity but Lord truly teach us to number our days that we may gain that heart of wisdom hear us

Lord hear us as we cry unto you seeking forgiveness for our sins seeking that you would draw near to us and that you would have mercy upon us hear us Lord as we cry out unto you for your name's sake we pray Lord these things in Jesus name Amen