

THE GOD OF COMFORT FOR A DAY OF TROUBLE
ZECHARIAH 1:7-17

One writer has said, “Life is full of disappointments. The biggest catastrophes (wars and tsunamis) and the smallest inconveniences (lower back pain and unfulfilled desires) infuse unrest into our lives. Trials snatch peace from us.” [Menikoff, *Character Matters*.]

Meg was the mother of two children, Peggie and Joey, born with cystic fibrosis. Joey died at the age of 12; Peggie endured into her twenties before dying at the age of 23. Meg, the wife of a pastor, wrote a letter to a friend explaining how Peggie died:

The weekend before she went into the hospital for the last time, Peggie came home all excited about a quotation from William Barclay her minister had used. She was so taken with it that she had copied it down on a 3 × 5 card for me: “Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.”...

After Peggie had been in the hospital for a while and things were not going well, she looked around at all the paraphernalia of death to which she was attached. Then she said, “Hey, Ma, remember that quotation?” And she looked around again at all the tubes, stuck the tip of her tongue out of the corner of her mouth, nodded her head, and raised her eyes in excitement at the experiment to which she was committing herself...

I was sitting beside her bed a few days before her death when suddenly she began screaming. I will never forget those shrill, piercing, primal screams. Nurses raced into the room from every direction and surrounded her with their love. “It’s okay, Peggie,” one said. “Jeannie’s here.”

The nurses stroked her body. Eventually with their words and their touches they soothed her (though as time went on and the screaming continued, they could not). I’ve rarely seen such compassion. Wendy, Peggie’s special nurse-friend, tells me there isn’t a nurse on the floor who does not have at least one patient she would give one of her lungs to save if she could.

So, it’s against this background of human beings falling apart—nurses can only stay on that floor so long—because they could not do more to help, that God, who could have helped, looked down on a young woman devoted to Him, quite willing to die for Him to give Him glory, and decided to sit on His hands and let her death top the horror charts for cystic fibrosis deaths. [Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, 177-9.]

You feel the pain of that woman’s suffering, don’t you? You hear the questions and the hurt. You sense the longing for comfort — comfort for her daughter, for her, for her family. From where will comfort come?

It was a different kind of suffering, but the Israelites also had questions about their suffering: Israel had been taken into captivity to Assyria (722 B.C.); 100 years later, Judah followed into captivity to Babylon. And 70 years after that, the nation of Israel started to return to her land. But they were still suffering oppression while in the land, and in their discouragement and fear, they did not complete the rebuilding of the temple after laying its foundation.

Zechariah addresses them with prophecies to exhort them to finish the temple. And in this morning's passage we see him encourage them with the revelation of a vision of God's comfort in their trouble.

GOD HAS SUFFICIENT COMFORT FOR HIS PEOPLE'S TROUBLES.

This morning, we consider Zechariah's first vision:

1. What Zechariah **SAW** (vv. 7-8)
2. What Zechariah's Vision **MEANT** (vv. 9-11)
3. What Zechariah's Vision **TEACHES** About God's Comfort (vv. 12-17)
 - ✓ God comforts by providing an **INTERCESSOR** for God's people (v. 12)
 - ✓ God comforts by jealously **LOVING** His people (vv. 13-14)
 - ✓ God comforts with righteous **RETRIBUTION** on the ungodly (v. 15)
 - ✓ God comforts with an **ULTIMATE** provision for His people (v. 16)
 - ✓ God comforts with a **RENEWED** commitment to His promises (v. 17)

1. What Zechariah SAW (vv. 7-8)

- **24th day of the 11th month...** Between verses 1 and 7, approximately three months passed. While we don't know the date of the call to repentance (vv. 1-6), we do know this date — February 15, 519 B.C.
 - ✓ This is the first of eight visions God gave Zechariah on that night (through 6:10).
 - ✓ It is two months after Haggai's final visions (2:10, 20 and the end of his formal ministry).
 - ✓ This date is significant because exactly (to the day) five months earlier, the people had resumed work on the temple (Hag. 1:14-15). They have been evidencing repentance through those months.
 - ✓ This vision (and the ones that follow) are all given to affirm the provision of God for the people and the ultimate success of their work.
 - ✓ [Aside: OT prophecies often had both near and far fulfillments and that was certainly true of Zechariah's prophecies; we will attempt to point those out as we work through the book.]
- **I saw at night** is a formula for the revelation of a vision. When you see **night**, don't assume this is a dream. Zechariah is not sleeping and he is not unconscious. His mind is active and he is interacting with participants in the vision. He is fully alert. We don't fully understand how he saw what he saw — the point is that this is not of his own creation, but it is something that came from God to him.
- What did Zechariah see? Actually, it's a little confusing (and the commentators don't all agree).
 - ✓ He saw **a man was riding on a red horse...standing** — perhaps he was standing on the horse (in stirrups); more likely he was on the horse and the horse was standing among the myrtle trees.
 - ✓ Three other horses of varying colors were with the lead rider (v. 8).
 - ✓ There is **a man standing** among the myrtle trees (v. 10); maybe the same as the rider on red horse?
 - ✓ There is an angel to interpret the vision (v. 9). He is distinct from the **angel of the Lord** (v. 11) and he is not the rider (v. 8; it would be unusual for the rider to speak of himself in the third person).
 - ✓ Is the **angel of the Lord** the man standing (v. 10) or the rider (v. 8), or both? Is he a theophany?
 - ✓ My understanding is that the angel of the Lord is not the rider of v. 8 since it would be unusual for God to send the second member of the Trinity on a patrol with other angels.
 - ✓ What is the meaning of the colors of the horses and myrtle trees? We are unsure since the text doesn't tell us — they likely just provide additional "color" to the story, like parables often do; the use of horses that patrolled (v. 10) likely gives a military emphasis and power/authority (contra 9:9).
 - ✓ While the details may be confusing and debated, the message of the vision itself is clear: "The only point Zechariah needed to communicate was the heavenly origin of the messengers and the message they delivered." [Klein]
- That's the vision. But what does it mean?

2. What Zechariah's Vision MEANT (vv. 9-11)

- Zechariah's question in v. 9 affirms that he does not know what the vision meant. So he turns to an angel who was there (**my Lord**, v. 9; **angel**, vv. 9, 13) to ask for clarification. The angel will be seen throughout the visions (1:13-14, 19; 2:3; 4:1, 4-5; 5:10; 6:4)
- Twice the angel says that these horses represent a **patrol** (vv. 10, 11).
 - ✓ They were sent by the **Lord** (v. 10) — on a mission for Him. They were under YHWH's authority.
 - ✓ The word patrol is the same as how we use it; they were walking back and forth across all **the earth**. The sense is that they were constantly and extensively examining the condition of the world.
 - ✓ Remember that they are searching out the vast territory of Darius.
 - The nation had begun returning to the land of Israel in 536 B.C. under Cyrus (who defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C.).
 - Cyrus died and was replaced by Darius in 521 B.C. **Darius' empire was vast**. He ruled over an area that included Persia, Mesopotamia, Israel, Egypt, and Asia Minor. He is powerful ruler over a significant kingdom and ruled authoritatively.
 - ✓ We know that he ruled authoritatively because of the report of the riders: **all the earth is peaceful and quiet**. Initially, that seems like a hopeful report — “all quiet on the western front.”
 - ✓ But think of it this way — Darius has conquered many nations that were not naturally Medo-Persian, and no one is resisting. There are no skirmishes or wars against him. He is ruling with authority and dominance all over the world. No one can resist him or his power.
- This is a reminder of the weightiness of Israel and Judah's problem. While they are back in the land and even have received blessing from the M-P rulers, there is still much opposition (see Ezra 4-5).
 - ✓ The opposition Israel faced is a reminder that just because people righteously follow God (and Christ in the NT), does not mean they will have a life of ease.
 - ✓ There are hardships in this world. Circumstances we don't understand (e.g., **Mk. 4:35ff**).
 - ✓ There are medical trials and financial pressures and relational difficulties; sin remains — both in me and in the people around me. And that creates problems. It was true in Israel and it is true today.
 - ✓ So where was help for Israel and where is there help for us?



3. What Zechariah's Vision TEACHES About God's Comfort (vv. 12-17)

- God comforts by providing an **INTERCESSOR** for God's people (v. 12)
 - ✓ In verse 11, the **angel of the Lord** is introduced. That title is used 58x in the OT (6x in Zech.). Often (though not always), it appears to be either the presence of God Himself or of pre-incarnate Christ.
 - ✓ The angel of the Lord was often terrifying to those who saw Him (Balaam, Num. 22:22ff; Manoah,

Judg. 13:20), exceedingly powerful (killing 185,00 Midianites in one night, Is. 37:36) and able to forgive sins (Zech. 3:4; Ex. 23:21??) — indicating that He was different than other angels.

- ✓ This reference is probably a reference to the pre-incarnate Christ because of 3:1-6:
 - The angel of the Lord is called **the Lord** and invokes the name of the Lord in rebuking Satan (v. 2).
 - He has the authority to rebuke Satan, something other angels do not do (Jude 9).
 - He had the authority to forgive sin (3:4) — something only God can do through Christ.
- ✓ What is notable in 1:12 is what the angel of the Lord does — He intercedes for Judah:
 - He asks **how long will you have no compassion?** To refer to a time when God was not compassionate with Israel refers to the time of discipline in the Babylonian captivity.
 - The question is, “When will this end? Will you relent and restore compassion?”
 - It seems that He is particularly asking about Jer. 29:14 — not just, “when will the 70 years of captivity end?” (since they already have), but “when will the blessing (of the Temple) come?”
- ✓ He also specifically notes the suffering of both the city where God’s presence dwelt in the temple, **Jerusalem** as well as the southern kingdom, **Judah**.
- ✓ What is notable about this episode in this verse is that Israel has an advocate pleading her case; she is not alone but has the highest representative in the highest place (in the Trinity!) advocating.
- ✓ This also is the believer’s comfort: we are not alone, but when we don’t know what to pray, both the Spirit and the Son intercede for us (Rom. 8:26, 34).

- God comforts by jealously **LOVING** His people (vv. 13-14)

- ✓ It seems likely that Zechariah did not hear God’s response to the intercession of the angel of the Lord since **the Lord answered the angel**. This is the angel of v. 9 who has been **speaking** — interpreting.
- ✓ The angel summarizes that the words of God were **gracious** and **comforting**.
- ✓ God speaks words that are “good” (pleasant and desirable) and reassuring (e.g., Eph. 4:29).
- ✓ The rest of this section reveals the gracious and comforting words of God.
- ✓ The first comforting word was God’s jealous love for His people (v. 14).
 - God is **exceedingly jealous** — “jealous with jealousy,” it’s intensified.
 - When we think of jealousy we think of “love gone wrong.” But in God, it’s the right expression of love — we might call His jealousy His “protective love.” He preserves those who are His.
 - To say that God is jealous is to say that He is not passive, aloof, or uninvolved. He is passionate, engaged, and active in preserving His people.
 - Even though they had been disciplined for a (long 70-year) season, God’s love is still active.
 - This love is expressed to the city of **Jerusalem** (His covenantal city) and **Zion** (probably a reference to the location of the temple and worship).
- ✓ Neither Israel or we should take God’s discipline to mean He does not love; once He has bestowed His covenantal love, it cannot be removed. He is faithful to Himself and His love.
- ✓ Notice all the ways God manifests His love on His NT believers (1 Jn. 4:7-14); same was in the OT.

- God comforts with righteous RETRIBUTION on the ungodly (v. 15)

- ✓ It might be tempting for Judah (or us!) to say, “You love, but what about our enemies? Why do they persist in enjoying freedoms and blessings?”
- ✓ Verse 15 affirms that God is angry with the nations (in the context, Babylon and Medo-Persia) — “I am angry with great anger.”
- ✓ Why is God angry? Because the nations are **at ease** — they are enjoying comforts and rest (v. 11b) while Israel is being afflicted. They don’t care about the nation and the hardship they inflicted.
- ✓ This verse also indicates that God intended to use the nations to discipline Israel correctively (**only a little angry**), but they carried it too far (**furthered the disaster** — “evil”). “They thrashed when they should have spanked.” They were God’s instruments of correction and misused the authority.
- ✓ God says that the nations will be held accountable for their actions; they will not escape God’s wrath. (This is not unlike what God said to **Habakkuk** in **2:6ff** — Babylon would be punished.)
- ✓ We have a sense of justice in which we fear that unrighteousness will escape judgment.
- ✓ God had already judged Babylon about 20 years earlier and would also judge Medo-Persia.
- ✓ God will also judge all unrighteous nations and people (**Rom. 12:19**; **Rev. 20:12-13**). We don’t need to be wrathful. God will fully judge all sin with full righteousness. No one ultimately gets away with sin.
- ✓ We will see that in the next vision, 1:18-21.

- God comforts with an ULTIMATE provision for His people (v. 16)

- ✓ The angel also reveals that the Lord says, **I will return to Jerusalem with compassion**. This is a direct answer to the question asked by the angel of the Lord in v. 12 — is God compassionate?
- ✓ Yes! God has compassion and will return to His people/city.
- ✓ Specifically, **My house will be built in it**. There is a short-term fulfillment (Ezra 6:14ff).
- ✓ But this is a reference to the return of God’s glory to the temple, restoring what departed in **Ezk. 10:18-19**. Ezekiel also promises a return of that glory in MK (**Ezk. 39:21-22**; **43:2-5**; **44:4**).
- ✓ There is a coming day in the Millennial Kingdom and in Glory when we have the full experience of the comfort of God. He is comforting (2 Cor. 1:3-4); that comfort will have full expression in eternity.
- ✓ John Flavel: “For the comfort of those of you who are genuine Christians: As nothing can comfort a man that must go to hell at last, so nothing should deject a man that shall through many troubles at last reach heaven.”
- ✓ Similarly, Richard Baxter said, “The reason of our impatience and censuring of God, is that we gaze on the evil itself, but fix not our thoughts on what is beyond it...We see God burying us underground, but we foresee not the spring, when we shall revive. Could we but clearly see heaven, as the end of all God’s dealings with us, surely none of his dealings could be grievous.”
- ✓ Yes there are difficulties here; but that does not mean God is not comforting now and it does not mean that His final comfort is overwhelmed. Keep looking at His final provision.
- ✓ We will see this expanded in the third vision (ch. 2).

- God comforts with a **RENEWED** commitment to His promises (v. 17)

- ✓ As you read v. 17, what word dominates? **Again**. It is used 4x. It is a reminder of God's commitment. He has not forgotten Israel. He will provide and care for her.
- ✓ **The Lord of Hosts** (Almighty God) reminds Zechariah and Judah that God is not miserly — my cities will overflow with prosperity — God's goodness is going to be "scattered" everywhere. His blessings will be inescapable; they will be superabounding and overflowing. (Think about confetti at a victory parade or hitting the jackpot on a slot machine — except it's perpetual and eternal.)
- ✓ As part of that blessing, **the Lord will again comfort Zion** (center of worship, v. 14, 16) and **choose Jerusalem**. Notice the repeated emphasis on comfort (vv. 13, 16, 17). Here the comfort is about the choice of Jerusalem as His city where the Messiah will reign.
- ✓ That choice has already been made (2 Chron. 6:6); God is not saying that He had rescinded it. This statement is a reaffirmation: "I chose it and I choose it again, still."
- ✓ I might say something similar, "Raye Jeanne, I chose to marry you 35 years ago, and I do it again!"
- ✓ It is a reaffirmation of love and commitment to His people and His promises. They can trust Him.

Lessons:

- ✓ Whatever is happening in the world, God is still authoritative.
- ✓ God will do what is right against those who are wrong.
- ✓ God loves His people.
- ✓ Whatever is happening in the world, God's people have a future that cannot be tarnished.

CONCLUSION: Earlier, I read part of the letter from Meg, whose daughter died a painful death at 23. Here is some of her conclusion in that letter:

Peggie never complained against God. It was no pious restraint: I don't think it ever occurred to her to complain. And none of us who lived through her death with her complained at the time either. We were upheld. God's love was so real, one could not doubt it or rail against its ways. If I've been telling you all this in an effort to come to some kind of resolution to the problem of Peggie's and my pain, perhaps I've been brought once again to the only thing that helps me experience God's love: His stroking, His "I'm here, Meg." [Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, 179.]

Whether your concern is about what you read in the news and editorial pages, or for natural disasters, or personal calamities, or relational griefs, God is acting, He is with you, and He is comforting. Don't despair.

BENEDICTION: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24