

May 10 Lesson 11 (NIV)

PROMISING PEACE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Zechariah 8:18–23

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Zechariah 8

ZECHARIAH 8:1–8, 11–17

¹ The word of the LORD Almighty came to me.

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.”

³ This is what the LORD says: “I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.”

⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. ⁵ The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”

⁶ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?” declares the LORD Almighty.

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. ⁸ I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.”

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¹¹ “But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past,” declares the LORD Almighty.

¹² “The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people. ¹³ Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.”

¹⁴ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, ¹⁵ “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. ¹⁶ These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; ¹⁷ do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

KEY VERSE

I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. —Zechariah 8:15

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 3: Called to God's Work of Justice

LESSONS 10–14

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the expressions of the peace that God promises.
2. Explain why jealousy is not a sin or character defect when applied to God.
3. Write a couplet that dedicates his or her life to embracing God's "new normal."

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Don't Forget Me!
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Stability (ZECHARIAH 8:1–8)
 - A. Return to Zion (vv. 1–3)
 - B. Restoration of Jerusalem (vv. 4–8)
- II. Prosperity (ZECHARIAH 8:11–17)
 - A. Reversal of Fortunes (vv. 11–15)
 - Used to Be Poor*
 - B. Renewal of Responsibility (vv. 16, 17)

Conclusion

- A. God Dwells with Us
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

athazagoraphobia *ay-thaz-uh-gor-uh-foe-bee-uh.*

Haggai *Hag-eye* or *Hag-ay-eye.*

Zechariah *Zek-uh-rye-uh.*

Introduction

A. Don't Forget Me!

There's a little-known psychiatric condition called athazagoraphobia. It refers to an irrational fear of being forgotten. The associated anxiety can be debilitating. Sufferers may feel the need to check in with family constantly while traveling. Or they might excessively remind a coworker

about an upcoming meeting. Changes in plans can bring on panic attacks. Sufferers' lives are filled with anxiety and fear.

A few passages of the Bible speak of a fear of being forgotten by God (example: Lamentations 5:20); many more speak of the reality of people forgetting him (example: Jeremiah 3:21). That fact speaks directly to an important role of prophets: pointing out the reality of God's memory and its implications for us (example: Zechariah 10:9).

B. Lesson Context

By one count, there are at least 30 men in the Bible by the name of Zechariah. The one who wrote the book of today's study was a prophet from a priestly family; his recorded ministry occurred after the Babylonian exile (Ezra 5:1, 2; 6:14; Nehemiah 12:12, 16). The datings in Zechariah 1:1, 7; 7:1 compute to a time between late 520 BC and late 518 BC.

The setting in post-exilic Jerusalem is essential to understanding Zechariah's prophecies. Twenty years after returning from exile, signs of God's continued favor seemed to have disappeared (Ezra 4:24; Haggai 1:1–11). Many of those who returned undoubtedly wondered if God had forgotten them.

I. Stability **(ZECHARIAH 8:1–8)**

A. Return to Zion (vv. 1–3)

1. The word of the LORD Almighty came to me.

The phrase *the word of the Lord ... came to* occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament as a standard introduction to a prophecy. Much rarer is inclusion of the description *Almighty*, most occurring in this book (compare Isaiah 39:5; Zechariah 7:4; 8:18). It serves to stress God's power. God is therefore both fully present and fully capable to accomplish whatever he determines to do.

2a. This is what the LORD Almighty says:

As if to doubly stress the Lord's power, the prophet uses the phrase *the Lord Almighty* again. A more literal translation of "hosts" (2 Chronicles 33:5) or "army" (33:11) reveals the military connotations of this title. God is the warrior who fights for his people. This is a favorite phrase of Zechariah, occurring more than 50 times in his book.

2b. "I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her."

There is no doubt in the prophet's mind that the Lord has the right to be *jealous for* his people; they are his exclusively (see Joel 2:18). God's jealousy is not like that of a boy who has a fit if he sees his girlfriend flirting with someone else. The biblical concept of jealousy when applied to God indicates a profound sense of caring and commitment.

This is even more apparent where a word in the original language is translated "jealousy" in one passage but "zeal" in another. For example, the Hebrew noun translated "jealous" here and "jealousy" in Ezekiel 8:3, 5 is rendered "zeal" in Isaiah 9:7; 37:32; 59:17; 63:15. The Greek noun translated "jealousy" in 2 Corinthians 11:2 is the same one translated "zeal" in Philippians 3:6.

Overlap in meaning is affirmed in English by a dictionary entry that offers one meaning of *jealousy* as "zealous vigilance." The common idea is one of fervency. God's jealousy implies his right to protect his people and to be angry at those who would hurt them (Zechariah 1:14, 15). God will show what it means to have him fully present in his infinite power, intent on keeping safe those who are his own.

3a. This is what the LORD says: “I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem.

Zechariah’s ministry includes encouraging the returned exiles to finish rebuilding the temple (see Ezra 4:24–5:2). When God declares his intention to *dwell in Jerusalem*, he refers specifically to the temple (see also Zechariah 1:16). *Zion* can refer to the entire city of *Jerusalem* or to only the temple area. Both of these represent the entire nation. For the returned exiles, God’s presence signifies the restoration of his favor (compare Isaiah 52:8; Zechariah 2:10; contrast Ezekiel 10).

3b. “Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City,

Though the Jews had suffered judgment, Zechariah reinforces God’s intentions on their behalf. God’s renaming of *Jerusalem* uses a term that evokes themes of loyalty and trustworthiness (compare Isaiah 1:26; Jeremiah 33:16). Post-exilic Jerusalem is to have a reputation of residents who keep faith with one another. That trustworthiness is to be without limit as the covenant between God and his people is fully honored.

In the New Testament, the “new Jerusalem” represents the final, complete fulfillment of God’s intention (Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10; compare Galatians 4:26). In this sense, the city reflects the mountain about which Zechariah prophesies next.

3c. “and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.”

The renaming continues. The *mountain* to which Zechariah refers is the hill upon which the temple will be rebuilt. A comparison of the date in Ezra 6:15 (which computes to March 12, 515 BC) with that in Zechariah 7:1 (which computes to December 7, 518 BC) indicates that this rebuilding project is not yet complete.

To designate *the mountain of the Lord Almighty* as *the Holy Mountain* serves to set it apart from normal human activity; it is to be reserved wholly for God’s use. Such an image of God’s holy mountain shows up several times in prophecy in this regard (examples: Isaiah 66:20; Ezekiel 20:40; Joel 3:17; contrast Isaiah 65:11).

The redesignations of both the city and the mountain project the idea of uncompromised loyalty to God—true faithfulness.

B. Restoration of Jerusalem (vv. 4–8)

4. This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age.

A noticeable effect of God’s active presence will be the longevity of God’s people. Only a country enjoying peace and stability sees its citizens reach *old age*. Disease, war, and injustice attack the hardest those least able to protect themselves, and this certainly includes those of advanced age. But in the future prophesied, no one is neglected.

5. “The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”

Similarly, there will be no injustice in *the city* to threaten the safety of *boys and girls*. Referring to the oldest and youngest is a way of expressing the totality of the security and stability in God’s kingdom (compare Jeremiah 30:20). All God’s people are to be deeply invested in extending his security and care toward one another. From the last generation to the next, all are to be safe from harm (compare 31:13). This is a powerful promise for those who had experienced the violence of exile.

6. This is what the LORD Almighty says: “It may seem marvelous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvelous to me?” declares the LORD Almighty.

The new normal God is instituting is so *marvelous* as to seem fantastical, even impossible, to the original readers. The original word being translated “marvelous” is also translated “wonders,” referring to miracles, in Psalm 78:11. People will undoubtedly struggle to believe what God promises to do. Perhaps doubt is here expressed in the model of Gideon’s question in Judges 6:13. But for God it is no problem; *the Lord Almighty* has the power to fulfill each promise he makes.

7. This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west.

Again we see the imagery of extremes. The phrasing *of the east and the west* indicates a complete whole (compare Psalm 107:3; Isaiah 43:5). For the returned exiles, this likely recalls their fellow Israelites’ being taken into exile in Assyria, as well as other migrations that seem permanent (compare 11:11).

The word translated *save* is frequently used in contexts of liberation from foreign oppressors (examples: Exodus 14:30; Judges 6:14). This association causes problems in the first century AD for those who think of this connection rather than that of being saved from the oppression of sin (compare and contrast Luke 1:71; Acts 1:6; Colossians 1:13).

8. “I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.”

The powerful themes presented thus far are repeated. To exist fully as God’s *people* suggests their taking his characteristics of being *faithful* and *righteous* as their own. God’s loyalty to his people is thus to come full circle in their loyalty to him. That has been God’s intent since the first sin (compare John 12:32). In the New Testament, God’s intent to include Gentiles is sharply clear. Even so, that inclusion is nothing new, as underlined by quotations from the Old Testament in the New (see Acts 13:47; Romans 15:12; etc.). Zechariah’s prophecy finds its ultimate fulfillment in the church.

II. Prosperity (ZECHARIAH 8:11–17)

A. Reversal of Fortunes (vv. 11–15)

11. “But now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as I did in the past,” declares the LORD Almighty.

Here God moves the new normal a step further. This time of restoration will not follow any pattern expected by *the remnant*. God has a change in mind that vastly exceeds what their recent experience may predict. Thus far, they have faced the uphill battles of reclaiming their land, rebuilding their heritage, and maintaining priorities while doing so (see Ezra 4; Haggai 1:2–4). The result has been poor harvests and inadequate clothing (1:5–11).

12. “The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew. I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people.

This promise reads like a reversal of the curse God put on all the earth after Adam and Eve’s sinning (Genesis 3:17–19). Similar prophecies draw even clearer parallels (see Ezekiel 34:25–29; Haggai 2:15–19). Lists of blessings elsewhere reflect similar promises (example: Leviticus 26:3–10).

The promise of good harvests goes hand in hand with the promise of stability in the land. That in turn implies no war, no raids, and no political unrest to destroy the fruitfulness of the land.

13. “Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.”

Bringing the themes of blessing and curse full circle, God reminds his people of his original promise to bless the nations through Abraham (Genesis 12:2, 3). They had been a *curse* in that while claiming to belong to God, they were disloyal and followed every kind of wrong behavior.

No one could have looked at pre-exilic Judah and understood either who God is or what belonging to him really means. Instead of drawing the nations toward God, their behavior ridiculed him. But now God’s people will prove his love and his power in this new normal of living in God’s presence. Just as Abraham was a blessing to the world by demonstrating a life lived in loyalty to God, so will they be. Despite their history of disobedience, God promises restoration without fear of reprisal.

Hands is frequently a symbolic reference of strength and ability in the Old Testament (see lesson 10). To strengthen one’s hands is to renew one’s power and motivation to act. This results in a person being encouraged and empowered to act confidently in the service of God.

14. This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty,

God reiterates the old pattern of relationship that characterized Israel and Judah before their exiles (compare Zechariah 8:11, 13, above). The phrase *showed no pity emphasizes that God did not give* them “comfort,” as the same Hebrew word is translated in Isaiah 52:9; 66:13; etc.

15. “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid.

Passages such as Jeremiah 4:27, 28 reveal God’s former resolute intention to punish the people of the covenant. In something of a parallel, the verse before us now reveals God’s resolute intent to do the polar opposite. On *do not be afraid*, compare the discussion on fear in lesson 10.

B. Renewal of Responsibility (vv. 16, 17)

16, 17. “These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

God’s people must reflect his character in their relationships. This is why the themes of *judgment* and *truth* turn up again. These two concepts go hand in hand and should define the lives of God’s people.

The word *courts* refers to a city’s entrance where legal issues were settled (example: Ruth 4:1, 2, 11). To practice justice there is to set the proper example for everyone watching to do so as well. There will be no bribes, no partiality shown to anyone (see Exodus 23:8; Isaiah 33:15, 16; etc.). For God to state what he hates establishes boundaries of human behavior. This is reminiscent of other blessing/curse and love/hate declarations (examples: Deuteronomy 12:31; 16:22; Proverbs 6:16–19).

Ancient covenants established between kings and citizens frequently listed the positive attributes and actions of the ruler before listing the expected reciprocal responsibilities of the citizens. Zechariah’s prophecy is essentially a covenant in miniature: it institutes a new normal of peace in light of God’s presence with his people.

Conclusion

A. God Dwells with Us

When a relationship needs to go from bad to good, someone has to make the first move. The text for today tells of a time when God did just that. The bad relationship between God and his covenant people was wholly the fault of the people. Logically, therefore, they should have made the first move. But God in his compassion took the initiative, promising great things to his people. And so it still is: God promises great things for us when we actually deserve quite the opposite. He is determined to redeem all who are willing to acknowledge him as sovereign Lord. Do you?

B. Prayer

Father, may our allegiance be to you alone! Strengthen us to reflect that value and your character daily. We pray for this in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Only God offers true restoration and peace.¹
