

Zechariah 1:2-6

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Zechariah invites the exilic remnant of Judah to return to God so that He may return to them, consistent with His covenant promise. He warns them not to behave like their fathers did, provoking God to anger and experiencing His judgment.

The previous section provided the reader with information concerning the date, authorship, and source of the prophecy. It tells us that Zechariah received a revelation from the LORD “in the eighth month of the second year of Darius,” the fourth Persian king (October-November 520 BC). The present section commences the divine message. It is a powerful call to repentance.

The LORD gave the message to Zechariah for the returning exiles. He began by referring to Himself in the third person, saying: *The LORD was very angry with your fathers* (vs 2). The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the self-existent and eternal God who revealed Himself to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The name Yahweh emphasizes God’s covenant relationship with His people. The term *your fathers* refers to the pre-exilic generation of Judeans, especially those who lived to see the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC (2 Kings 21:14–15). The text tells us that they made God *very angry* as a result of their disobedience.

The term *angry* tells us that the pre-exilic generation of Judeans displeased *the LORD*. The Hebrew text tells us that God *was very angry*. Human beings usually manifest their anger through a loss of self-control resulting in evil behavior. God’s anger, however, is an act of His will. His anger exhibits no loss of control. Rather, it results in deliberate judgments against sin, which is behavior that twists and perverts His design for Creation. In this case, Judah had violated their covenant/treaty with God, and turned to a pagan culture of exploitation rather than living in loving support of one another, as required in their covenant (Leviticus 19:18).

Before telling the returning exiles about what their ancestors did to provoke Him to anger, the *LORD* paused to invite the new generation of Judeans to renew their fellowship with Him. He told Zechariah to speak *to them* and enveloped the message with the prophetic formula *Says the LORD of hosts*. This expression occurs three times in this verse with a slight variation.

The first occurrence is *Thus says the LORD of hosts*. It introduces the divine message in this section. The second formula (*declares the LORD of hosts*) follows the first part of the message (*Return to Me*). It reinforces the first formula and reiterates the authority behind the message. The third occurrence of the formula is, *Says the LORD of hosts*. It follows the second part of the statement *that I may return to you* and marks the pinnacle of the message.

God promised in His covenant/treaty with His people that if they would return to Him after they were judged and exiled, then He would return to them (Deuteronomy 30:1-6). Now God, through Zechariah, calls His people to return to Him so He can honor this part of His covenant. God always desires good for His people (Jeremiah 29:11). He wants them to possess the blessing He offers (Deuteronomy 30:19), but often His people do not walk in His prescribed ways.

The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the self-existent and eternal God who revealed Himself to Moses out of the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The term translated as *host* is “sabaoth” in the Hebrew language. It means “armies” and often refers to the angelic armies of heaven, as in 1 Samuel 1:3. The phrase *the LORD of hosts* occurs frequently in the prophetic books. Often, it describes God’s power as a warrior leading His angelic army to defeat His foes (Amos 5:16; 9:5; Habakkuk 2:17).

Here in Zechariah, the phrase *LORD of hosts* demonstrates God’s power as the supreme warrior who has complete control over all human affairs. Indeed, *the LORD* is “God Almighty” (Genesis 17:1). He reigns forever and “is clothed with majesty” (Psalm 93:1). This is important given that Judah is in a fragile state, under the dominion of Persia, and just beginning to rebuild.

The essence of the *LORD*’s message to His people is simple but has a profound theological meaning: *Return to Me that I may return to you* (vs 3). The verb *return* denotes a movement back to a previous location or condition such as human beings returning to dust at death (Genesis 3:19) or Jacob returning to the land of his parental origin after a twenty-year sojourn with Laban in Haran (Genesis 31–35).

However, the imagery of returning is more than a physical motion. It is a change of behavior, a change of mental focus. Thus, to *return* to God means to turn from our wicked ways and be devoted to Him. It implies a wholehearted turning from reliance on one’s desires to a firm resting on the covenant promises of God. It is a turning away from the path of sin and self-reliance and a subsequent *return* to a place of restored fellowship and peace with God through following His ways.

That is why the *LORD* asked His wayward covenant people to *return to Him* so that He might *return* to them. That means God would cause His covenant people to benefit from His unique presence and abundant blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). He would “forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). God is committing here to follow His promise to them, as expressed in His covenant agreement with His people (Deuteronomy 30:1-6).

Having invited the returning Judean exiles to renew their fellowship with Him, *the LORD* gave them a brief history lesson explaining why He *was angry* with their *fathers* (v. 2). He urged them with these terms: *Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds’* (vs 4).

Before the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the pre-exilic *prophets* had called the ancestors of the exilic remnant of Judah to *return to the LORD* (Joel 2:12–14). They were to abandon their wicked ways and turn to God in faith. Time and time again, the prophets had called them to “seek God that you may live” (Amos 5:6). However, *‘they did not listen or give heed to Me,’ declares the LORD* (vs 4). They were rebellious and stubborn. The people ignored God and His covenantal laws. Therefore, He judged them severely, as was called for in His agreement with them.

The *LORD* then asked the post-exilic generation a question regarding their ancestors: *Your fathers, where are they?* (vs 5). The expected answer to this rhetorical question is, “They are no

more.” The ancestors of the post-exilic Judeans had passed off the scene. But more to the point, they lost their country, and were exiled to Babylon. Their disobedience resulted directly in their judgment (1 Chronicles 9:1).

Sadly, many died in their disobedience against their Suzerain God. God used the Babylonian army to defeat them (Habakkuk 1:6). Thus, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem, destroyed it and exiled its people:

“He burned the house of the LORD, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. So, all the army of the Chaldeans who *were with* the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Then the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon and the rest of the people, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.”
(2 Kings 25:9–12)

The LORD asked a second question to the post-exilic generation: *And the prophets, do they live forever?* (vs 5). The expected answer to this rhetorical question is: “No, *the prophets* did not *live forever*” because human beings are mortal—“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

The pre-exilic generation of Judeans were to repent while the *prophets* were alive to avoid God’s judgment. It is important to seize the right opportunities to live for God and do what is good. Some Judeans missed that opportunity, so they experienced God’s wrath (v. 3). However, although the prophets are no longer alive, the word they spoke still lives, because God’s word does not return void (Isaiah 55:11).

The LORD asked a third rhetorical question that anticipates a “yes” answer: It stands in sharp contrast to the first two: *But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers?* (vs 6). The term *word* refers to God’s commandments. The term *statutes* (“*ḥuqqîm*” in Hebrew) refers to something prescribed by an authority. As such, it could be translated as “prescriptions,” or “decrees” (Deuteronomy 12:1). These two terms emphasize the totality of God’s authority and the necessity to obey His decrees (Deuteronomy 4:1; 5:1).

The LORD raised some people as *prophets*. He *commanded* them to warn His covenant people of their sins and invite them to repentance to avoid judgment. These *prophets* were God’s *servants*. They were to remind the covenant community that God had a will for them, cared about them, and wanted to communicate with them. Simply put, *the prophets* were to lead the people of God on the path of righteousness. They preached the divine message to their respective generations and then died when God called them home. But their word remained, because God’s word remains.

Although the former generation of Judeans and the *prophets* who ministered to them had died, the word of the LORD did not return void (Isaiah 55:11). His *words and His statutes* overtook the people. The verb *overtake* means that the divine judgment caught up with the wicked ones

(Deuteronomy 28:15). Then, as they experienced God's judgment, *they repented and said, 'As the LORD of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us'* (vs 6).

God designed cause-effect for the moral universe that is just as dependable as the cause-effect He designed for the material universe. He upholds these cause-effect relationships, and has the power (*LORD of hosts* or "armies") to ensure all happens as He *purposed*. Notably, here God *purposed* to ensure that there are consequences directly connected with the *ways* and *deeds* of His people. It is clear in God's covenant with Israel that they had a choice, and that their choices would result in consequences keeping with life/benefit/connection, or death/cursing/exploitation (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The verb *repented* here likely has a twofold aspect. First, it implies that the pre-exilic generation of Judeans came to their senses and realized they deserved the judgment of God because what transpired to them was a direct result of their own *ways* and *deeds*. They took responsibility for their actions, recognizing that "The problem is us." They recognized that they had refused to listen to His *prophets*, and therefore had chosen the adverse consequences that they had suffered.

Second, it indicates that some Judeans genuinely turned away from their evil ways and received the forgiveness of God. They *repented*. This is an excellent illustration of repentance:

- A recognition of the reality of cause-effect (my ways and deeds have consequences) (Galatians 6:8).
- An acknowledgment that we knew deep down what is right and true, and chose to ignore it (Romans 1:19-20).
- Recognizing "This is my responsibility"—then making a choice to choose a new and better way.

In the ancient world, there were several kinds of treaties between two nations or parties. One such treaty was the ["Suzerain-Vassal Treaty."](#) In this agreement, the suzerain or superior ruler promised to bless his vassals if they would obey his stipulations. That means he would reward them for loyalty and obedience. Conversely, the suzerain promised to curse/punish his subjects if they ignored or rejected his stipulations. He would then curse/punish them for disobedience and rebellion. God chose this familiar treaty construction in order to define His relationship with Israel and Judah, as outlined in Exodus–Deuteronomy.

God's Suzerain-vassal structure had notable differences to the secular treaties of the time. For one, He did not make a treaty with Israel's ruler, as a human ruler would do. Rather, God made a treaty directly with the people (Exodus 19:8). That is why Zechariah can properly speak of the choices made by individuals within Judah, as well as groups of individuals, such as the rulers.

The LORD chose the people of Israel as His vassals and spelled out His promises to assure them they would receive His rewards if they followed His commands:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant

then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
(Exodus 19:4–6)

The LORD loved His covenant people and accepted them as His children. His acceptance of them as His people was unconditional, and irrevocable (Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Romans 11:29). He gave them His covenantal laws to show them how to please Him and maintain their fellowship with Him. And the way to please Him was to love one another, as they loved themselves (Leviticus 19:18). God’s desire for His people is for them to live in the most constructive, life-giving, flourishing manner possible. And, although He gives us ample revelation to know that way, He leaves it up to us to choose to live it (Romans 10:18).

The people of Israel understood God’s requirements to the point that they “answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’” (Exodus 19:8). They entered into their Suzerain-vassal style covenant/treaty with God intentionally, and freely. But they had not kept their vow.

Unfortunately, while God remained faithful and trustworthy, the people of Israel/Judah failed to keep their parts of the bargain. They continually rebelled against God despite the warnings of the *prophets*. Consequently, the LORD used the Assyrians to defeat Israel and send them into captivity (2 Kings 17:5-6). Yet, Judah did not learn from her sister, and also continued to rebel against the covenant/treaty into which they had entered. So God judged them by allowing the Babylonians to seize Judah’s land and send her citizens into exile (2 Kings 25:8-12).

In Zechariah, God warned the people of the errors of their *fathers*, who lost their fellowship with Him, and followed the pagan ways of exploitation and deception. This warning was intended to lead the post-exilic generation from repeating the errors their *fathers* committed.

Biblical Text

²“The LORD was very angry with your fathers. ³Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Return to Me,” declares the LORD of hosts, “that I may return to you,” says the LORD of hosts. ⁴“Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.”’ But they did not listen or give heed to Me,” declares the LORD. ⁵“Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? ⁶But did not My words and My statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, ‘As the LORD of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.’””