

Zechariah 5:1-4

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Zechariah sees a flying scroll with curses written on each side. The scroll is the instrument through which the LORD will punish thieves and those who abuse His name by making false oaths.

This passage records Zechariah's sixth vision, which emphasizes the need for God to remove the sinners from among the covenant community to purify the land and bless His people. He would accomplish this cleansing by means of a scroll flying above the earth, representing a curse going out to the entire land of Judah.

The prophet began by saying, *Then I lifted up my eyes again and looked* (vs 1). To *lift up the eyes* is an idiomatic expression meaning to look around (Genesis 13:10; 18:2). Although all the visions appear to have come to Zechariah in one night, there was likely an interval between each one, giving the prophet time to reflect on what he saw. During that moment of reflection, Zechariah likely focused on the images of that scene until another one caught his attention and interrupted his thoughts.

As the prophet *looked* to see the new episode, *behold, there was a flying scroll* (vs 1). In ancient times, people wrote most lengthy documents on papyrus *scrolls*, either leather or parchment. They would fasten several sheets together and wind them around a long stick to produce a volume, with a second stick at the other end to facilitate winding. The reader would then hold the rollers one in each hand, unwinding it from side to side, not from top to bottom. Biblical writers used the *scroll* to write Scriptures because it was the standard form for a book until the fourth century AD (Jeremiah 36:2; Ezra 6:2; Luke 4:17).

The *scroll* ("megillah" in Hebrew) in Zechariah's vision was an unrolled volume because it flew above the earth. The interpreting angel ("he" in Hebrew) who spoke with the prophet in the previous visions asked him, *What do you see?* Zechariah replied, *I see a flying scroll*. He went further to give the dimensions: *its length is twenty cubits, and its width ten cubits* (vs 2).

The term translated as cubit is "ammah" in Hebrew. It is a unit of length based on the length of the forearm from the tips of the fingers to the elbow, which would cause it to measure about 18 inches. Interestingly, the measurements of the *scroll* were the same as the portico area of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:3). *Twenty cubits* is also the length of the screen that served as a gate for the wilderness tabernacle (Exodus 27:16). Perhaps this dimension indicated the scroll's connection with the presence of God.

Although Zechariah could identify the *scroll* effortlessly, he did not know its significance. But the angel did not hesitate to reveal to him what was in it. Thus, *he said to the prophet, This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land* (vs 3). The demonstrative pronoun *this* refers to the *flying scroll*, which is called a *curse* in our text.

The term for *curse* is “’alah” in the Hebrew text. It is an oath and means the ratification with which the LORD promised to judge the partner who broke the terms of the covenant (Deuteronomy 29:19; Isaiah 24:6). In this case, it refers to Israel, who entered into a covenant with God, and vowed to keep His commands (Exodus 19:8).

When the LORD gave the covenantal laws to the Israelites, He vowed to bless them if they would obey Him wholeheartedly (Deuteronomy 28:1–14). He also promised to curse them if they turned away from Him (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). To emphasize that curses would fall upon Israel if they chose to break their covenant promises, God had half the nation stand upon Mount Ebal and pronounce the curses that would come upon them if they broke their covenant vow (Deuteronomy 27:13).

Thus, the *scroll* in Zechariah referred to the dire consequences called down on those who ignored God’s covenantal stipulations. It was a *curse* because it announced judgment on the wicked ones who broke their covenant vow. It was *going forth* over the entire *land* of Judah to catch all those who rebelled against God and His covenant laws.

The angel further told Zechariah that the *scroll* had writing on both sides and targeted two groups of people. The first are those who practiced theft: *surely everyone who steals will be purged away* (vs 3). The verb *steal* is “gānab” in the Hebrew language. It generally refers to the secret act of taking someone’s goods and possessions without the owner’s knowledge (Genesis 31:30; Leviticus 19:11; Deuteronomy 5:19). The verb *purge away* means to clean or clear something out or to remove it. It means that the LORD would cleanse the land by removing anyone committing theft.

God would execute this judgement against theft *according to the writing on one side*. God would judge the thieves according to the stipulations *on one side of the scroll*. To steal from another was in direct violation of God’s covenant, which prohibited stealing (Exodus 20:15). This was one of many commands that required the Israelites to love their neighbors as they did themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

The second group of people that would fall under the *curse* would be those swearing falsely: *everyone who swears will be purged away* (vs 3). To *swear* means to take a solemn oath by calling upon God to attest to the oath transactions. It is a vow to keep a promise and is a serious matter. Swearing falsely represents an unsocial attitude toward the one who accepts the oath as assurance. It is also a transgression against the LORD who serves as the oath guarantor. This too is a violation of God’s covenant command, which required Israel to speak truly to their neighbor (Exodus 20:16).

For the sin of dishonesty against and stealing from their neighbors, God would judge the people of Judah: they would *be purged away*. The phrase *purged away* translates the Hebrew word “naqah” which carries the idea of cleansing from guilt.

These acts of dishonesty against their neighbors dishonored the LORD, and broke His covenant contract which they agreed to honor. Therefore, the LORD would destroy the transgressor

according to the writing on the other side (vs 3). He would do so to remove the sinner from the covenant community.

The words *on one side* of the *scroll* allude to the ninth commandment prohibiting bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16). It could also be seen as violating the third commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain by swearing false oaths (Exodus 20:7). The words *on the other side* refer to the eighth commandment condemning theft against their neighbor (Exodus 20:15).

To have intimate fellowship with God required treating well their neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). The two commandments to "Love God" and "love others as one's self" encompass all the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai to the Israelites (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5).

The same principle of blessing for obedience and judgment for disobedience applies to believers today. Just as Israel was (and is) God's chosen people, those who believe are born anew and made a part of the Body of Christ. This is a gift that will never be taken back, as the gifts of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:29).

However, just as with Israel, our choices have consequences. If we sow to the flesh, we reap corruption (Galatians 6:8). Conversely, when we sow to the Spirit, we reap life. The concept in the Old is the same as the New Testament. Jesus confirmed this in the Gospels when asked to speak about the greatest "commandment in the Law" when He replied that the two greatest commands were to love God with all our being and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36–40; Mark 12:30–31).

Loving the LORD and loving our neighbor allows us to fellowship with God and man. When we are honest in all our dealings, we please our Lord and build a harmonious self-governing society, thereby fulfilling our priestly role (1 Peter 2:9).

Conversely, when we ignore the divine laws, we fail to accomplish our priestly mission on earth and fall under God's judgment (Romans 1:22-24, 26, 28; 2 Corinthians 5:10). God never rejected Israel from being His people (Romans 11:28-29). Similarly, God will never reject believers from being His children (2 Timothy 2:13). But our choices have consequences, and will result in blessing and reward or loss.

The prophet Zechariah expressed the severity of the judgment against Judah using a direct quote from God, thereby allowing the post-exilic community to hear from their covenant partner directly. He stated, *I will make it go forth*. The pronoun *it* refers to the curses written on the *flying scroll*. God would send the *scroll* out to judge all those who violated His covenantal laws. Then, the prophet paused to add the prophetic formula, *declares the LORD of hosts*, thus confirming the source of his message.

The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the self-existent and everlasting 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 (1 Samuel 1:3). In sum, the phrase *the LORD of hosts* describes God's power as a warrior

leading His angelic army to defeat His foes (Amos 5:16; 9:5; Habakkuk 2:17). It demonstrates God's power to punish all those who disobeyed Him and refused to repent.

After the prophetic formula, the prophet resumed his speech about the *flying scroll* going forth and said, *It will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name* (vs 4). The phrase *house of the thief* represents those who do wrong to their neighbors. And *the house of the one who swears falsely by God's name* represents all those who insult the LORD.

When God pronounced similar judgments upon Judah prior to its exile to Babylon, the judgment was poured out upon the entire nation. Now, after Judah's exile is over and people have returned to the land, the curse for disobedience is being delivered only upon *the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely*. It appears now that God is judging individuals, purging them from defiling the land.

The two types of sinners represented all those who practiced immoral and wicked deeds. On the day when the *flying scroll* visits them, *it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones* (vs 4). Here again, the emphasis is on *that house*, rather than all houses within Judah. Zechariah now pronounces that God will begin to purge sin from Judah, household by household.

In biblical times, *timber and stones* were among the primary building materials used in houses. For instance, the Israelites used *timber* in the construction of Solomon's temple, which contained a variety of woods like cedar, cypress, and olive wood (1 Kings 6:14–36). Likewise, ancient Israelites used *stones* and unbaked bricks to build altars (1 Samuel 6:14; 14:33). The prophet utilized these two terms (*timber and stones*) to represent the building materials for a house. In doing so, he made it clear that the LORD would send the *flying scroll* to destroy the wicked and leave their homes in ruins on the day of judgment.

Biblical Text

Then I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, *there was a flying scroll*.² And he said to me, "What do you see?" And I answered, "I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits."³ Then he said to me, "This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side."⁴ I will make it go forth," declares the LORD of hosts, "and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones."