

Zechariah 8:14-17

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The Suzerain (Ruler) God promises to restore the fortunes of the people of Judah. But He expects them to dispense true justice in the community and refrain from evil and dishonest practices.

In Zechariah 8:9–13, the LORD urged the remnant of the post-exilic Judeans who had returned to their land from exile in Babylon to be courageous to complete the temple's rebuilding because He would give them peace from their adversaries and bless them beyond measure. In the present passage, He continued with the theme of blessings and told the people what to do in order to satisfy His demands. But before the LORD spoke, Zechariah introduced Him with the formula, *Thus says the LORD of hosts* (v 14).

The term *LORD* is Yahweh in the Hebrew language. It describes the God of Israel as the self-existent and eternal One. Yahweh is God's covenant name, which He revealed Himself to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). That name describes His relationship with His people and comes from the Hebrew verb "to be." That is why God instructed Moses to say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent you" (Exodus 3:14). In Zechariah, the everlasting God is called *the LORD of hosts*.

The term translated as *hosts* is "sabaoth" in the Hebrew language. It means "armies" and often refers to the angelic armies of heaven (1 Samuel 1:3). Thus, the phrase *the LORD of hosts*, which occurs with frequency in the prophetic books, describes His 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 demonstrates His majestic power as the supreme warrior who controls all human affairs. Indeed, *the LORD* is the all-powerful God. He is "the Lord of all the earth" (Zechariah 6:5).

The all-powerful God began His message by describing the effects of His past judgment on Judah: *Just as I purposed to do harm to you* (v 14). The Hebrew verb translated as *purposed* is "zamam." It means to plan and act purposefully. It explains someone's determination to do something. In our passage, we learn that God purposed *to harm* His disobedient people in order to discipline them. God did this for their good, as He disciplines those whom He loves (Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:5-6; Revelation 3:19). And God always loves His people (Jeremiah 31:3).

The Hebrew verb translated as *to do harm* comes from the noun "ra'ah" in Hebrew. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on the context. In Jonah 1:2, it is translated as "wickedness" and refers to moral sins such as injustice, violence, and crime (Hosea 10:15; Jeremiah 41:11). In our passage, it has to do with disaster or calamity God would send to His people to discipline them (Amos 3:6; Obadiah 13). God determined to judge His people *when your fathers provoked Me to wrath* (v 14).

The word *wrath* speaks of God's action of judgement brought about by human disobedience and unrighteousness. In the case of Israel, God's *wrath* upon Israel was a provision of their covenant/treaty with Him. Israel agreed to abide by the covenant, which contained corrective

provisions for disobedience (Exodus 19:8). The provisions read somewhat like an inverse golden rule, in that Israel was told that if they adopted the exploitative pagan practices of their neighbors, God would turn them over to the surrounding neighbors to be exploited.

In the New Testament, God's wrath is said to pour out upon anyone who neglects the truth, and seeks instead to follow a lie (Romans 1:18-20). In Romans, God's wrath is manifested by turning each person seeking to indulge their own flesh (often at the expense of others) by turning them over to become enslaved by their own appetites. God turns them over to their "lusts" (Romans 1:24), which further deteriorates to "degrading passions" (Romans 1:26), finally resulting in a "depraved mind."

Sometimes *the LORD* executes His wrath directly. An example is when He was angry when the people of Israel played the harlot with the daughters of Moab when they "bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:3). In His anger, He sent a plague killing all those who had participated in such activities, 24,000 in total (Numbers 25:9).

In our passage, just as God *purposed to do harm to Israel when your fathers provoked Me to wrath*, now God has *purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah* (v 15). This makes clear that God's wrath is not reactive. Rather it is very purposeful. Just as a human father disciplines a child for his good, so God does to His children (Hebrews 12:9-11).

The prophet inserted the expression *says the LORD of hosts* to remind the post-exilic community of Judah of the primary author of the message: God is speaking directly. So, the LORD added, *And I have not relented*, referring to the fact that He has visited His wrath on those who were disobedient. The verb *relented* means to abandon a severe intention or a cruel treatment. For instance, in the book of Jonah, God had a change of heart toward the Ninevites. He changed His course of action. Instead of destroying them, as He had purposed to do, He withdrew "His burning anger so that they would not perish" (Jonah 3:9-10).

However, in Zechariah, God stated that He had not *relented* from His plan to judge the Israelites/Judahites. His judgement had continued to the day of Zechariah's prophesying. However, now God plans to bless Israel, *to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah*.

In Zechariah 1, we learned that 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 were rebellious and stubborn. The people ignored God and His covenantal laws.

Therefore, enough was enough. God's patience ran out, and He punished the people severely, as set forth in His covenant/treaty agreement with them (Zechariah 1:2-6). But God's judgment was not final. He comforted the returning exiles and said, *So I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah*. Just as God purposed judgement that the people might return, God has purposed a restoration. However, the people have a part to play. Their assignment is to once again begin to keep the key provisions of God's covenant/treaty with

them—which Jesus summed up as loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40).

To *do good to Jerusalem and Judah* is to reverse the past effects of judgment, as indicated in the previous verse. The prepositional phrase *in these days* refers to the days in which the post-exilic community lived. It contrasts the former days when the pre-exilic Judahites rebelled against God and *provoked Him to wrath* (v. 14). At that time, He determined *to harm* them as He sent them into captivity in Babylonia (2 Kings 25). But now He would *do good* to the inhabitants of *Jerusalem and Judah*, allowing them to prosper again. For this reason, He encouraged them, saying, *Do not fear!*

In this context the *fear* referred to is fear of the surrounding nations. Fear is a fundamental motivator of human action. It can also immobilize men or affect their activities seriously. That is why the LORD told Jeremiah not to *fear* the faces of his opponents, because He wanted the prophet to complete his prophetic assignment (Jeremiah 1:8). Similarly, the LORD warned Ezekiel not to *fear* the rebellious Israelites but to speak the truth boldly to them, “whether they listen or not” (Ezekiel 2:6–7).

In Zechariah, the returning exiles were to be brave as they served God because He promised to restore His favor to them. Inferred in this statement is that God’s people are being asked to fear God over fearing the surrounding nations. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). To fear God means being more concerned about failing to do what God tells us than being concerned with what others can do to us.

God’s blessings came with the expectation that the people would renew adhering to the provisions of the covenant/treaty they had vowed to keep. The Suzerain (Ruler) God outlined the obligations He required from His vassals, Judah.

He introduced the stipulations with the statement, *These are the things which you should do* and began with two positive commands. The first reads, *Speak the truth to one another* (v 16).

The Hebrew term for *truth* is “*emet*.” It means honesty and factuality. It refers to a genuine situation as opposed to a false one (Deuteronomy 13:14; 17:4). For instance, the queen of Sheba confessed that the report she had heard about Solomon’s “words and wisdom” was factual (1 Kings 10:6). When someone *speaks truth* to others, he is reliable and honest. People can have confidence in what they say. Conversely, if he speaks lies, nobody will trust him unless he shows evidence of a change of behavior later. God urged the Judeans to be honest in all their dealings. They were to have integrity.

The New Testament repeats the importance of speaking the truth, contrasting it with following “the trickery of men, by craftiness, in deceitful scheming”:

“...but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.”
(Ephesians 4:15)

In this verse from Ephesians, speaking the truth in love is an important path to maturing as a believer, and gaining the fulfillment God desires for us as humans.

The second positive command reads, *Judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates* (v 16). The Hebrew word translated as *judgment* is “mišpat.” It can refer to God’s laws or stipulations, encompassing individual commandments and a summary of the whole law (Exodus 24:3; Deuteronomy 5:1, 7:12). In our passage, “mišpat” refers to the administration of legal decisions in a courtroom, as suggested by the term *gates*, a place of legal administration. Lying to another person is a form of exploitation, and is part of a family of exploitative behaviors. A major reason God judged Israel was because their land had filled with lying, stealing, killing and adultery (Hosea 4:2).

God established Israel as a self-governing nation based upon the rule of law, private property, and consent of the governed. Jesus stated that the application of God’s law was summarized with the command to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). Accordingly, justice was to be administered without partiality. His covenant people were not to “take a bribe,” for doing so “blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:18–20). They were not to give preference to someone either because they were rich or poor, but to judge righteously, based on the law (Leviticus 19:5).

Here in Zechariah, *the LORD* told the people to *judge with truth*, for doing so would bring *peace* (“shalom” in Hebrew). That means that there would be harmony among the post-exilic community, which would promote the prosperity of the people. The idea of “shalom” is for all things to work together according to God’s (good) design. God’s law reflects God’s good design. As the Apostle Paul asserted, when New Testament believers are God-directed and walk according to the Spirit, they fulfill the Law (Romans 8:4).

In ancient times, in addition to being an entrance and exit, the *gate* of a city was also the location where judges sat to dispense justice (Deuteronomy 17:5, 21:19). A major reason God had judged Judah and sent it into exile was because they had become oppressive to the poor, and were not judging in righteousness (Habakkuk 1:4).

The LORD then balanced the positive commands with two negative ones. The first reads, *Let none of you devise evil in your heart against another* (v 17). The verb *to devise* carries bad overtones and speaks of a premeditated act. It means to plot against someone, that is, to establish a plan to harm someone (Hosea 7:15; Nahum 1:9).

To devise evil is to think of ways to hurt others. This mode of thinking is the opposite of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). For “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Romans 13:10). A “love your neighbor culture” leads the citizens of a self-governing society to live in harmony with each other, caring for one another, and protecting one another. In Zechariah, *the LORD* told His covenant people not to plan ways of hurting one another. He added another negative command and said, *Do not love perjury* (v 17—literally, do not love a false oath). For more on the “love your neighbor” nature of the law, read our [commentary on Leviticus 19](#).

Perjury is the intentional act of swearing falsely. In the ancient world, swearing often occurred in the “courtroom,” which typically took place in the gates. There people would take a solemn oath by calling upon God to attest to the oath transactions. They would vow to keep a promise. To tell lies under oath 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. It is a self-centric means of manipulation and exploitation; this is also the opposite of the love-your-neighbor culture God had commanded His people to follow, for their own good (Deuteronomy 10:13).

The LORD is good and fair in all His dealings. “He loves righteousness and justice” (Psalm 33:5). That is why He instructed His covenant people to *speak the truth* and promote justice in the community of Judah. These commandments are among the things God loves because they bring harmony to a self-governing society. On the other hand, He asked His people to refrain from *evil* and dishonest practices. Then, He gave them the rationale for that: *For all these are what I hate* (v 17). The *these* God refers to that He hates refers to swearing false oaths and plotting harm upon others.

Evil deeds and dishonest practices are harmful to any society because they break mutual trust among the citizens, causing them to expend resources to protect and defend rather than build and create. It leads people to live in relational isolation.

Speaking untruly and plotting harm are contrary to God’s character. God is truth, and shows us the pathways to truth (Psalm 25:10, 57:10, 117:2, 119:151; John 14:6). God hates deceit. He made humans in His image, and when we walk in deceit we walk apart from God’s (good) design (Psalm 5:5; Proverbs 6:16–19). When humans walk in deceit, they walk in the way of death, and self-harm. God desires that we walk in ways that bless us; those are the ways of truth.

Zechariah closed this section with the expression *declares the LORD* to remind the returning Jewish exiles that these stipulations belong to the LORD, their covenant partner. Therefore, they would do well to obey them to receive divine favor and blessing.

Biblical Text

¹⁴“For thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Just as I purposed to do harm to you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and I have not relented, ¹⁵ so I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear! ¹⁶ These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. ¹⁷ Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,’ declares the LORD.”