

Zechariah 9:11-13

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The LORD announces His plan to free Zion's captives to fulfill His promise to her. He urges them to return home because He will give them a double blessing and use them to defeat Greece.

In the first section of Chapter 9, the Suzerain (ruler) God promised to punish the nations surrounding Judah. He would stop them from oppressing His covenant people and find a remnant among them who would worship Him (Zechariah 9:1-8). In the previous section He predicted the coming of a righteous king (Jesus) who would deliver Israel and bring peace to the entire earth (Zechariah 9:9-10).

In the present section, God announces His plan to rescue the Jewish exiles from Babylonia and grant them victory and prosperity in their land. He caught the attention of His people when He declared, *As for you also* (v 11). The pronoun *you* is feminine singular in the Hebrew text, suggesting that it refers to Zion (v. 9).

Then, the LORD explained the rationale for His actions in favor of Zion: *Because of the blood of My covenant with you* (v 11). The term translated as *covenant* is “berith” in Hebrew. It refers to a bond and implies the notion of imposition or obligation (Psalm 111:9).

The phrase *blood of My covenant with you* might allude to the sacrifice that ratified God's covenant with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 24:8). Because *the blood* sealed the *covenant*, the LORD described what He would do for His people: *I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit* (v 11). In the covenant between God and Israel, each made vows, much like a marriage covenant. God had vowed to restore His people if they strayed and experienced the enforcement provisions of the covenant by being exiled (Deuteronomy 32:36).

The verb form *I have set free* is a perfect tense in Hebrew, which often describes past events in narrative texts. However, in prophetic literature, it generally refers to actions that would take place in the future. The prophet Zechariah used this tense to show that the action is a done deal. It will happen because it is spoken by the LORD, the faithful God.

The *waterless pit* pictures the exile of the Judeans from their land. It is a picture of someone in captivity. Joseph was made captive by his brothers who put him into a dry well (Genesis 37:23-24).

In 597, and again in 586 BC, the Babylonians had taken Judeans captive to Babylonia. Jeremiah prophesied that they would serve the Babylonian king for 70 years, then be delivered (Jeremiah 25:11; 29:10). We saw in Chapter 1 that Zechariah's prophecy began in the second year of King Darius, around 520 BC, which would have been about 77 years after the initial exile of Judah to Babylon in 597 BC. As promised, God created the opportunity for Judah to return to their homeland.

The *prisoners* here seems to refer to the Judeans still living in exile in Babylonia in Zechariah's day. Some had already begun to return, with the initial pioneers returning under Ezra, which is believed to have been around 538 BC. The Jews maintained a substantial presence in Babylon well into the Middle Ages. Evidence of this is that the largest part of the text of the Talmud (written oral tradition) is called the "Babylonian Talmud." Peter also references Jewish believers in Babylon in 2 Peter 5:13.

Therefore, because God planned to liberate them, He issued a command: *Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope* (v 12).

The term *stronghold* denotes a place of safety. It likely refers both to Jerusalem as well as the LORD in our passage. The Jewish exiles were *prisoners* in a foreign land. They lived outside of the land of their spiritual blessing, rest, and security (Deuteronomy 12:10). Yet, they retained hope, knowing that one day their Suzerain (ruler) God would keep His promise and would restore them to dwell in their land, as God had promised through the prophets (Jeremiah 29:10).

The hope that these prisoners have is in God's promise to them that they will be delivered. Many Jews had already returned to the land; it seems here that God is exhorting those who remain in Babylon to also return. To call Jerusalem a *stronghold* at this point was more about God's provision than Jerusalem's physical status. Although the temple would soon be restored at the time of Zechariah's prophecy, it will be about another seventy years before Nehemiah would restore Jerusalem's wall. But anytime we are in God's will, we are in a *stronghold* and can *hope* that whatever He has promised will come to pass.

Thus, God called them to *return* home to find a haven. He strengthened the command and encouraged the people when He said, *This very day I am declaring that I will restore double to you* (v 12). That means that God would multiply the blessings of the people. They would have far more than what they ever had (Job 42:10). God is promising a reward to them if they will believe in His promise and return to the land.

The LORD then explained why the Judeans were to retain hope: *For I will bend Judah as My bow, I will fill the bow with Ephraim* (v 13). The term *bow* ("qešet" in Hebrew) denotes an instrument used for hunting or war. When shooting, the archer would hold the *bow* in his left hand and draw the bowstring with his right while nocking the arrow (2 Kings 13:15). In our passage, the LORD used the *bow* in a figurative way to depict power and warfare (Habakkuk 3:9).

In doing so, He portrayed the future reunification of Judah and Israel, represented here as *Ephraim*. Judah and Israel were united under King Solomon but split under his son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:16-17). *Ephraim* was the dominant tribe of Israel, the northern kingdom, so the northern kingdom often bore its name. Judah and Israel will be united as a team just as a bow and arrow.

Ephraim was the second son of Joseph. His name means "doubly fruitful" (Genesis 41:52). His descendants became known as the tribe of *Ephraim*. They dwelt in central Canaan, northwest of the Dead Sea, bordered by Manasseh on the north and Dan and Benjamin on the south (Joshua

16; 19:50). The Bible often uses *Ephraim* to represent the northern kingdom of Israel because it was the leading tribe in those days (Hosea 4:17, 11:1, 3). It also uses *Judah* to represent the southern kingdom.

God infers that He would use Judah and Israel as His weapons of war. He made that explicit in His next statements: *I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece; and I will make you like a warrior's sword* (v 13). Jewish tradition maintains that this prophecy predicts the successful Maccabean revolt against the Greek ruler Antiochus IV.

The term translated as *Greece* here is “yawan” or “Javan” (Genesis 10:2, 4). It was probably the Greek name Ionia, the Greek region of the western coast of Turkey and the Aegean islands. In Zechariah's day, the Greeks were involved in warfare with the Persians to control the east (Esther 2:1). After Zechariah's prophecy, they rebelled against Persia, the leading world power of the day.

Eventually, Alexander the Great defeated Persia and after his death his kingdom fell to his four generals. The Seleucid kingdom ruled over Judah. *Zion* (Judah) fought against their Greek overlords and defeated them around 165 BC. Judah was then somewhat independent for about a hundred years, when it then fell under the rule of Rome.

It is likely that the complete fulfillment of this prophecy against *Greece* will occur when Jesus returns and defeats the nations of the earth (Revelation 19:15). The term “nations” includes many cultures, but this might point to the outsized influence Greek culture has had on the earth. God will overturn the man-centric culture of Greece, that leads to pride and exploitation. Then the Lord will establish His Messianic kingdom upon the earth, as predicted in the previous section (Zechariah 9:9-10). His kingdom will be one of righteousness—where the earth will be filled with love and service rather than exploitation.

Biblical Text

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