

Lesson 3

7 Upon the four and twentieth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Sebat, in the second year of Darius, came the word of the LORD unto Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, 8 I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom; and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white.

Three months have passed since verse 1. The 24th day of the 11th month in the second year of King Darius would have been February 15, 519 BC by our calendar.

Haggai 2:18 tells us that the foundation of the temple had been laid in the interval between verse 1 and verse 7 of this chapter.

This vision also occurred in the wake of one of the most unsettled periods of Persian history. The monarchy had just shifted from the dynastic family of Cyrus to the family of Darius, who would establish his own dynasty.

This transition was accompanied by numerous revolts and rebellions, including several in Babylon that were put down very harshly.

What does Zechariah see in verse 8?

For some commentators, all they need to see are four horses before they start shouting, "IT'S THE FOUR HORSES OF THE APOCALYPSE! IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD!" In response to those commentators, I would say, "Whoa! Hold your multi-colored horses!"

First, the text does not say there are only four horses. Instead, it says there are horses (possibly four, but also possibly more than four) of four colors.

A better translation is: "I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a reddish brown horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses."

Second, a similarity of symbols (horses in Zechariah 1 and horses in Revelation 6) does not mean the objects of those symbols must be the same thing.

Here the context suggests that they are not the same.

Revelation 6 is discussing those persecuted (in fact, killed) by Rome, while here we are looking at those persecuted by Babylon.

Certainly there is nothing here in Zechariah suggesting we should suddenly jump 2500 years and counting forward in time to the end of the world. (And I might add there is nothing suggesting such a jump in Revelation 6 either.)

What do the horses depict? What do the colors depict? What do the myrtle trees depict? In short, what are these?

Fortunately for us, Zechariah asks that same question in verse 9.

9 Then said I, O my lord, what are these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will shew thee what these be. 10 And the man that stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, These are they whom the LORD hath sent

to walk to and fro through the earth. 11 And they answered the angel of the LORD that stood among the myrtle trees, and said, We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.

Here we have an inspired explanation in the text itself, and so, according to one of our ten rules, we should pay very close attention to what is said.

If our interpretation disagrees with this inspired explanation, then, of course, our interpretation is wrong.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. In verse 8 we see a man riding a horse. In verse 9 we see an angel talking with Zechariah. In verse 10 we see a man standing among the myrtle trees. In verse 11 we see the angel of the Lord standing among the myrtle trees. What do we have? Two men and two angels? One man and one angel? Something else?

The commentaries go crazy over this question, but I think the best answer is that the man in verse 10 is the man in verse 8 — both are described as standing among the myrtle trees.

The angel of the Lord in verse 11 is also said to be standing among the myrtle trees, but I think that angel is most likely the same angel who is speaking with Zechariah in verse 9 because they are “answering” this angel in verse 11, which suggests we have heard from him before.

Who is the angel of the Lord?

A very interesting Bible study (and one we have discussed before) is to look at the appearances of the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament.

We know that Jesus is not an angel because, unlike Jesus, angels are created beings. (Psalm 148) But the word “angel” just means “messenger,” so in that sense Jesus could be called an angel.

Are any of the angelic appearances in the Old Testament really preincarnate appearances of Jesus? (Again, let me stress that I am not saying that Jesus is an angel — only that the word “angel” may have been used to describe Christ as a “messenger.”)

Who spoke to Moses from the burning bush?

Exodus 3:2 — *And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.*

But also note verse 4:

Exodus 3:4 — *And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.*

What did the angel of the Lord say to Hagar in Genesis 16?

Genesis 16:10 — *And the angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude.*

And what did Hagar say in verse 13?

Genesis 16:13 — *Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?*

Who stayed Abraham's hand in Genesis 22?

Genesis 22:11-12 — *And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.*

The "me" at the end of verse 12 is the angel of the Lord in verse 11! As I said, it is an interesting study!

In this book, we will see the angel of the Lord again in Chapter 3 and in Chapter 12. The appearance in Chapter 12 may be particularly instructive.

Zechariah 12:8 — *"and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them."*

Stay tuned... More about this later.

So what then do the multi-colored horses depict?

Verse 10 tells us that they are those whom God has sent to patrol the earth.

What about the colors? What do they mean?

We are not told, but the colors of the horses most likely depict the varied missions of their riders. That is what the colors depict in Revelation 6.

Perhaps the red colors depict fire and blood, and the white color depicts glory and victory.

We can't say for sure, and perhaps the failure of the explanation in verse 10 to mention the colors means that the colors are just there to paint a more vivid picture.

What about the myrtle trees that were in the bottom?

The myrtle tree is a small evergreen, never growing taller than about eight feet.

That they were in the bottom just means that they were in a hollow. The trees were short to begin with, and this just made them appear even shorter.

If God had wanted to choose a tall, stately tree, he could have chosen a cedar or an oak, but he did not.

Remember how the great king Nebuchadnezzar was depicted in Daniel 4:11? "The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth."

Why not choose a tree like that? Why a myrtle tree?

What we see with the choice of a myrtle tree is a theme that runs throughout Zechariah, and in fact throughout the Bible.

God chooses people who appear small and insignificant from a worldly perspective, but God uses such people to accomplish his great and wonderful plans.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 — *For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

I think what we are intended to see here are swift messengers of vengeance and of victory going out for the good of God's people, who, though small and weak by earthly standards, have the power of God behind them working on their behalf.

What does it mean in verse 11 that "the earth sitteth still and is at rest"?

It could mean that this vision occurred during a lull in the rebellions against King Darius, and history in fact tells us that such was briefly the case at this time.

Early 519 BC was after the initial spate of rebellions and before the final spate of revolts that would begin later that year with the Egyptian rebellion.

But I think the context argues against that interpretation.

The verses that follow suggest that this time of peace refers to the peace that the Babylonians were experiencing in contrast to the divine judgment that had been prophesied against them.

We earlier looked at one such prophecy from Isaiah 13.

If we flip one chapter ahead to Isaiah 14:7, we find the same phrase that we see here in verse 11 — the whole earth is at rest, and is quiet. And those are the only two places in the Bible where that exact phrase is found.

Recall what we read earlier from Isaiah 13.

Isaiah 13:19-20 — *And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.*

We see a similar prophecy in Jeremiah 51.

Jeremiah 51:42-43 — *The sea is come up upon Babylon: she is covered with the multitude of the waves thereof. Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth, neither doth any son of man pass thereby.*

Those prophecies against Babylon had not yet occurred, at least not literally. Babylon received little to no punishment at the hands of Cyrus in 529. It was a very peaceful takeover.

The Jews may have hoped that the coming of Darius would mean that Babylon would finally get what it deserved, but that is not what happened. Darius put down the revolt and then Babylon just continued on as before.

Even with the rebellions in Babylon that Darius had forcefully put down, it could not be said that Babylon was no longer inhabited.

The report about Babylon being still and at rest here in verse 11 is similar to Psalm 73:12 — “Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.”

Why? We have that same question today, and the people of Zechariah’s day had that same question in 519 BC. Why? How long? That is the exact question we see next in verse 12.

12 Then the angel of the LORD answered and said, O LORD of hosts, how long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years?

Revelation 6:10 would later ask that same question about another great enemy of God’s people — Rome.

“And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10)

That verse has rightly been called the theme of the book of Revelation.

Notice, however, a big difference between the question in Revelation 6:10 and the question in Zechariah 1:12.

The question in Revelation 6:10 was asked by those who had been slain for the word of God.

The question in Zechariah 1:12 was asked by the angel of the Lord.

If this angel of the Lord is a preincarnate appearance of Christ, then the question in verse 12 is directed from God the Son to God the Father.

Whether or not this Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ, we know that Jesus was caring for and loving his people long before he was born into that manger. He was caring for us and loving us before the foundation of this world!

Revelation 13:8 describes Jesus as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

We can’t say for sure (at least not yet) whether this Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ, but it certainly deepens the meaning for me to think that it may have been Jesus standing among those myrtle trees.

So what is the answer to the question “how long?”

God's people suffered for 70 years. How long until Babylon meets its well-deserved fate?

13 And the LORD answered the angel that talked with me with good words and comfortable words.

God answers the angel with good words and comfortable words.

The references to "good words" reminds us of Joshua 23.

Joshua 23:14 — Not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed. (NAS)

God is faithful to his word — if God says it will happen, then it will happen. And Zechariah is not the only person who found comfort in that fact — we should take comfort in it as well.

The phrase "good word" appears twice in the book of Jeremiah, both times in connection with the restoration after the exile.

Jeremiah 29:10 is especially important because it refers to the promise of the end of the "seventy years," which was explicitly mentioned here in verse 12.

For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. (Jeremiah 29:10)

The phrase "good word" also appears in the important promise of restoration in Jeremiah 33:14, which points toward the restoration of both royal and priestly authority in Jerusalem, something we will also see in this book.

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. (Jeremiah 33:14)

So what were these good and comforting words? Keep reading.

14 So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy. 15 And I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.

The Lord answered the angel in verse 13, and now it seems that the angel passes these same words on to Zechariah in verses 14-17. And Zechariah, in turn, is told to pass these good and comforting words on to the people.

God's good and comforting words focus first on his zealous passion for Jerusalem and for his people, and then on his great anger towards those responsible for Jerusalem's destruction and his people's exile.

If the Jews thought that God had let Babylon off the hook for some reason, they were badly mistaken. God's anger against Babylon had not cooled.

By why was God angry with Babylon? Hadn't Babylon been doing what God wanted them to do? Hadn't God used Babylon to teach his people a lesson? Didn't God refer to Nebuchadnezzar as his servant in Jeremiah 27:6? Yes — but Babylon had gone too far.

That is what verse 15 says. God was a little displeased with his people, but Babylon went far beyond the level of discipline that God had wanted them to inflict.

Here is how the ESV translates the verse: "And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster."

In short, Babylon took advantage of the situation, and that is why God was very displeased with them.

The good and comforting words continue in verse 16.

16 Therefore thus saith the LORD; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the LORD of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem. 17 Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem.

In verse 3, God said, "Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you." We see that promised return here in verse 16. The people had returned to God, and the foundation of the temple had been laid.

What blessings would accompany God's return?

(1) His house would be built (verse 16). At the moment all they could see was the foundation, but God was telling them that they would see the completed structure.

(2) A line would be stretched over the city (verse 16). Not only would the temple be restored, but the city would be restored and rebuilt. A surveyor's line would soon be seen planning the rebuilding of the city.

(3) God's cities would overflow with prosperity (verse 17). That is, God's blessings would spread beyond Jerusalem into the surrounding areas as well.

(4) God would comfort and choose Jerusalem (verse 17). Jerusalem had been chosen once before, but it had fallen from that position. God promises that the city will be chosen again. God's relation with Jerusalem would be renewed.

When would these blessing be realized?

We will in this book, as in the other Old Testament books of prophecy, see some prophecies that would be fulfilled soon and other prophecies that would occur much later, sometimes hundreds of years later.

We know that Zechariah includes some distant prophecies because the New Testament frequently points to Zechariah as proclaiming the coming of Christ over 500 years later.

Into which category do these prophecies fall? Soon or distant?

I think we are looking here at prophecies that would soon come to pass. Why?

First, we know that the temple was in the process of being rebuilt, and the first promised blessing is simply that it would in fact soon be finished. If that blessing would soon occur, it seems natural to understand the following three as likewise coming to pass soon.

Second, these prophecies are not out of proportion with what we would expect these people to experience. That is not the case with other prophecies both in this book as well

as elsewhere, such as in Isaiah. Elsewhere we find promised blessings that are so wonderful and so far-reaching that they could only be realized in Christ and in his eternal kingdom.

In fact, Zechariah seems to deal in this book with people who were expecting all of God's promises to occur at once. Part of the goal of this book is to teach them patience. Yes, the promises will all occur, but they will occur according to God's timeframe — some now, some later.

And what about Babylon? How long until that evil city finally got what it deserved?

God does not answer that question. It seems that, too, was something that would occur in God's own timeframe.

And, one more thing about Isaiah's promised destruction of Babylon. Not only would it occur in God's own chosen time, but it would occur in God's own chosen manner.

Isaiah described its falls using vivid, apocalyptic language, and we should not take such language literally unless we are forced to do so.

With Isaiah 13 the force is in the opposite direction - that is, we are forced to take the prophecy as a figurative description of Babylon's fall. Why? Because verse 20 says that the city would never be inhabited; that no Arab would pitch his tent there. That has not literally happened to this very day.

A dispensationalist would tell you that the only thing that could keep people from pitching their tents in Babylon would be a nuclear bomb — and that is exactly what they say is being prophesied by Isaiah, and by reference here as well.

But does that make any sense at all? Do we really think God answers the question “how long” by promising to nuke a completely different group of people living thousands of years later? A little common sense goes a long way in understanding the Bible.

I think what we have in Isaiah is a figurative description of the judgment of Babylon from God's perspective.

Perhaps, some in Zechariah's day had misinterpreted Isaiah, and expected Babylon's destruction to literally occur in that manner — but if so, then they had something in common with modern premillennialists; they had misinterpreted the Bible.

We will see some very similar figurative language describing God's judgment of Rome when we get to the book of Revelation.

Questions about the first vision?

18 Then I lifted I up mine eyes, and saw, and behold four horns. 19 And I said unto the angel that talked with me, What be these? And he answered me, These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

The word “horn” can mean several things in Hebrew.

It often refers to the horns of an animal, whether those found on a ram, goat, sheep, or ox.

It can also refer to the tusks of an elephant.

The word can also refer to things constructed from such animal horns, such as a trumpet or a container for liquids.

The horn is an animal's offensive weapon, and so horns in the Bible usually depict strength and power.

Amos 6:13 — *Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?*

Jeremiah 48:25 — *The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is broken, saith the LORD.*

Daniel 8:3 — *Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last.*

(The two horns in Daniel 8 were the kings of Media and Persia.)

The difficulty with verses 18-19 is not determining the meaning of the horns. The difficulty is identifying four powers that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

Another difficulty is determining what is meant by Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

On the surface that list sounds simple enough, but why is Jerusalem the city listed along with the nation (Judah) that contained it? And why is Israel mentioned long after it was carried off by Assyria in 722?

One possibility is that we should look back over time for four powers that have harmed Judah (the Southern Tribes), Israel (the Northern Tribes), and Jerusalem (the royal city).

If that is the case, the four powers would likely be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. (Although Persia has been more of a friend than a foe.)

Another possibility is that Israel is being used here as a name of honor for Judah. It is used that way elsewhere in the Bible after the Northern Tribes were carried off.

2 Chronicles 23:2 — *And they went about in Judah, and gathered the Levites out of all the cities of Judah, and the chief of the fathers of Israel, and they came to Jerusalem.*

This view also find support in verse 21, which mentions only Judah as having been scattered.

If that is the case, then the number four is most likely being used here figuratively (which, you recall, should be our default position for apocalyptic language).

What is the symbolic meaning of 4? We have seen it before in our study of Daniel. Four is the number of the earth — four cardinal directions, four seasons, four elements, etc.

If that symbol is being used that way here, then these four horns represent all of the earthly powers that are arrayed against the people of God — and in my view this is the best option.

Some commentaries suggest we should be looking for two world powers rather than four world powers — why do they say that?

They say that if we have four horns, that means we have two animals, and so we should look for two world powers.

This does fit well historically — Babylon and Assyria scattered Judah and Israel.

But there is a problem here, or two problems, actually. The vision does not mention the number two, and the vision does not mention any animals connected to the horns.

We should not take a vision involving four horns and turn it into a vision involving two animals.

This would violate one of our interpretative rules — we should not add symbols to the text that are not present in the text.

What happens next?

20 And the LORD shewed me four carpenters. 21 Then said I, What come these to do? And he spake, saying, These are the horns which have scattered Judah, so that no man did lift up his head: but these are come to fray them, to cast out the horns of the Gentiles, which lifted up their horn over the land of Judah to scatter it.

Verse 20 introduces four carpenters.

The Hebrew word means smith, and it could include a worker in wood, stone, or iron.

Those who favor wood suggest these carpenters had come to finish the paneling in the temple, but I think workers in stone or iron is likely the better view. These workers were about to confront some very powerful enemies.

Even though it seems to more natural to picture someone dealing with a horned animal than with a disembodied horn, that we see four carpenters lets us know it would have been improper to change the four horns into two animals.

Because we have four of them it seems that the focus is still on the earth, which would mean that these four carpenters depict the mighty agents of God who carry out God's will and punish the enemies of his people.

These carpenters must have arrived with their tools because the next question is not "who are these people," but rather "what come these to do?"

What have they come to do to these four horns?

And this is where I really love the KJV — verse 21 says that they have come to "fray" them and to cast them out.

"Fray" is not a word we see that often (at least not in this sense), but it is the root word of the word "afraid." These carpenters are coming to frighten these horns and cast them out.

You mean there is something out there that can terrify the mighty empires of this world?

Yes — in fact, terror awaits all who are outside of God's family.

But it was even closer than that for the current mighty power, Persia. Alexander the Great would be born in less than 200 years, and he would turn mighty Persia upside down.

How did he do it? How did Alexander create one of the largest empires in the ancient world by the age of 30 and remain undefeated in battle? He founded cities that remain to this very day.

It remains a puzzle to anyone who has not studied the Bible. God was using Alexander to punish Persia, and he was also using Alexander to create the perfect Greco-Roman setting into which to send his Son and spread his Gospel.

If you really want a faith-building experience, just pick up a secular history book describing the time from Persia through first century Rome. You will see the hand of God working on every page.

Here's an example from the book "Rome and Her Enemies":

"Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?"

How on earth, he asks? It was not directed from anyone on earth. God caused it to happen, and Daniel had prophesied about it 500 years before the Roman empire began.

Questions about the second vision?

Chapter 2

I lifted up mine eyes again, and looked, and behold a man with a measuring line in his hand. 2 Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof.

Zechariah sees a man with a measuring line in his hand, and he asks the man where he is going — that is, where are you going to measure? The man answers that he is going out to measure Jerusalem.

What does this mean?

Remember that we are at this time in the year 519 BC. The walls around the city were still just piles of rubble. They would not be rebuilt until about 70 years later when Nehemiah arrived in 445 BC.

This lack of protection must have made the people very anxious, and must have caused them to wonder how long this new temple would last without any walls to protect it.

Measuring the city would have been the first step in rebuilding the walls.

The commentaries go to great lengths to compare this vision with the vision of the new temple in Ezekiel 40-48, but there are significant differences.

Ezekiel's vision is focused on the temple, while this vision is focused on the city.

The role of the wall in Ezekiel is to distinguish between the holy and the common, while here the wall provides protection.