

# The Survival of the Unfit

## Zechariah 9

David H. Roper

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I want you to study with me one of the most exciting and unusual prophecies to be found anywhere in the Old Testament. This is my own personal opinion, but I think you will agree after we have looked at the ninth chapter of Zechariah together. These words were written about twenty-five hundred years ago, in the early part of the Fifth Century B.C., yet they are just as relevant today as they were in the days when they were written. They have to do with survival in perilous times. I am sure that many of you are struggling to survive these days. This is unquestionably a time of pressure, when survival is not easy.

Paul predicted that in the last days there would be perilous times. He was not referring primarily to the period just prior to the coming of Christ. That particular term, "the last days," as defined in the New Testament, is the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ. When Paul says that there will be perilous times, he does not mean that times will be uniformly perilous, but intermittently. Jesus said they will be much like childbirth--as the time of birth approaches, the birth pangs, the contractions, increase both in frequency and in intensity. This is a description of the period between the first and second comings of Christ, and I think we are in one of these episodes of intense contraction and pain. This is one of these perilous times when all of us are sensing the pressure--and some of you are definitely imperiled, financially or physically or emotionally. We need to know how to survive, how to live, how to reign, in times like these. In this passage Zechariah tells us.

Let me give you a bit of background to this chapter, because we have come to a new division in the book of Zechariah. In this series, we have already surveyed the first eight chapters, which contain three prophecies. All three are dated - two in the second year of Darius' reign, and the one we looked at last time in the fourth year of Darius' reign. But beginning with chapter 9, the prophecies are not dated. We do not know when they were given; we only know it was some time after the turn of the Fifth Century--perhaps around 480 B.C.

The thrust of these prophecies is somewhat different than that of those preceding. The first set of prophecies, in chapters 9, 10, and 11, have to do with the Gentiles. As you read through this section, you will note that there are a number of geographical place-names, which are unfamiliar to most people. These are all places where Gentiles lived. Some fourteen times in these three chapters there is reference to the Gentile nations, while Israel is mentioned only obliquely and infrequently. But when you come to chapters 12, 13, and 14, you will find the names of Israel, Jerusalem, and Judah repeated many, many times. The name, Jerusalem, occurs twenty-two times in these chapters. So it is obvious that in chapters 12, 13, and 14 Zechariah is dealing with his people, and primarily with the city of Jerusalem; but in chapters 9, 10, and 11 he is dealing with the Gentile nations. That is one broad distinction.

There is another. In chapters 9, 10, and 11, all the prophecies apply to the first advent of Christ his coming and rejection and crucifixion. There is one very familiar prophecy in chapter 9, verse 9, about the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. There is one in chapter 11, verse 12, about the 30 pieces of silver that Judas was paid to betray Christ. But in chapters 12, 13, and 14, the references are all to the second advent of Christ. Here you have that great prophecy of Christ coming back, his feet touching the top of the Mount of Olives, and the mountain being split from east to west. We will look at these in some detail in future studies.

As we begin reading chapter 9, we will get a brief geography and history lesson which will help us understand and apply the point Zechariah is making, for though these prophecies were written in the Fifth Century B.C., they were

not fulfilled until many years afterward.

**The burden of the word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrach, with Damascus as its resting place (for the eyes of men, especially of all the tribes of Israel, are toward the Lord)...**

This prophecy is described as a "burden" or, in the margin of the New American Standard Version, an "oracle." An oracle is a specific word from God concerning the future, concerning the destiny of a people. Oracles were much in vogue at the time Zechariah made this prophecy. There was great unrest and disturbance among the Gentile nations, and people were resorting to oracles for direction in life. The most famous oracle of all was in the temple of Apollo, at Delphi. The priestesses would lean over a hole in the ground which from time to time emitted fumes of some kind of hallucinogenic gas. They would breathe these fumes, and then they would give forth oracles which were always expressed very ambiguously.

There is a famous story, which certainly was known by Zechariah, of a Lydian king named Croesus. (Lydia was a kingdom in the area we now call Turkey, in Asia Minor.) He was threatened by the Persian king, Cyrus, and was forced to pay tribute. He had the option either of going to war against Persia or of paying tribute for the rest of his life. He did not know what to do, so he went to the oracle at Delphi and paid his money—a great deal of money for which he received in return two box seat tickets to the Pythian Games for the rest of his life. That is a fact—it actually happened! And a priestess called Pythia pronounced her oracle. Croesus was told that if he went to war against Cyrus, he would destroy an empire. On the strength of that oracle, he crossed the River Halys, met the Persians, and was disastrously defeated. As he was retreating, it suddenly occurred to him that the empire he had destroyed was his own! He lost his kingdom because he followed the oracle.

Now, let me say something at this point, just as an aside. We live in times which are greatly similar. There is much unrest, and people are looking to supernatural sources for help. But there is only one oracle you can trust. Do not trust the cards; do not trust the stars; do not trust the wizards and the mediums. Trust the Word of God. That is the only place you can go to get a clear, unequivocal word. I believe Zechariah is playing on this idea. There were oracles throughout the ancient Near East; but there is only one oracle which can be trusted, and that is the oracle which comes from God—the word of the prophets.

You will notice that this oracle, or burden, is directed toward various nations or groups of nations. If you use a map of the Old Testament world, this passage will be easier to follow. "The burden of the word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrach [That is evidently a general title for all of Syria.], with Damascus as its resting place (Damascus is the capital of Syria.) (for the eyes of men, especially of all the tribes of Israel, are toward the Lord)." Zechariah is saying that this oracle he is pronouncing is going to rest on Damascus. And the eyes of men—and especially of God's people—are on the Lord. They are going to see what God is going to do to Damascus when his word rests upon it. Damascus, and Hamath, another very populous and well-known city, were the two major cities of Syria at that time. Verses 2 and 3:

**And Hamath also, which borders on it; Tyre and Sidon, though they are very wise. For Tyre built herself a fortress And piled up silver like dust, And gold like the mire of the streets.**

The word also is going to rest on Tyre and Sidon. These cities were located on the Mediterranean coast, in ancient Phoenicia. The Phoenicians were a powerful people at this time. It is highly likely that they circumnavigated the African continent. They probably got as far as Scandinavia, and they may have gotten as far as the New World. They were famous traders all over the known world. Tyre was their capital, situated on an island about a half-mile off the coast—absolutely impregnable. No one had ever been able to break their defenses. Nebuchadnezzar had held them under siege for fourteen years, and finally he went home in disgust. They are described here as very wise. But notice what Zechariah says in verse 4:

**Behold, the Lord will dispossess her And cast her wealth into the sea; And she will be consumed with fire.**

That must have evoked a lot of laughs in Zechariah's day! If ever there were a city unlikely to be dispossessed, it

was Tyre.

Ashkelon will see it and be afraid. Gaza too will writhe in great pain; Also Ekron, for her expectation has been confounded. Moreover, the king will perish from Gaza, And Ashkelon will not be inhabited. And a mongrel race will dwell in Ashdod, And I will cut off the pride of the Philistines. And I will remove their blood from their mouth, And their detestable things from between their teeth. Then they also will be a remnant for our God, And be like a clan in Judah, And Ekron like a Jebusite.

These four cities were the great city-states established along the coast by the Philistines. Zechariah says that these will all be destroyed, that a mongrel race will live there, and that these people will be assimilated into Israel, like the Jebusites. The Jebusites were Canaanites who lived in Jerusalem and were never driven out but simply were absorbed into the nation when the Israelites conquered the land. And these Philistines will be brought right into God's family like that. In a very graphic way Zechariah describes how the pagan sacrifices will be torn out of their mouths by God.

In Acts 8 there is the story of Philip, who met the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert at Gaza. The eunuch, a very powerful man in Ethiopia, was led to Christ as a result of Philip's concern for him, and his insight into Isaiah 53. The eunuch returned to Ethiopia a believer. Then the account says that Philip made his way along the coastal cities until he came to Azotus, which is the Green-Roman name for Ashdod. I believe that in fulfillment of this prophecy, these people (who by New Testament times were no longer Philistines, but a mongrel race) were brought into the family of God by the preaching of the gospel by Philip on his way to Caesarea. So this prophecy was fulfilled both in the destruction of the Philistines, as we will see in a moment, and in their spiritual inclusion in the family of God through Philip's evangelism.

When does all this mean? About 150 years after this prophecy was delivered, Alexander the Great crossed the Dardanelles with a very small army of Macedonians, a few geographers and historians, and a couple of botanists. They made their way across Asia Minor, fighting as they went. Nobody took them very seriously - certainly not Darius, the Persian king. He sent a little army of Greek mercenaries over to fight them. Crossing the River Granicus, Alexander's army defeated them. But Darius still did not take the threat seriously. They kept marching east, liberating one city after another-whether they wanted to be liberated or not-and finally met Darius' army in a very decisive battle at Issus. As an indication of how lightly Darius took this whole affair, he brought his wife and children along and placed them on a height overlooking the battlefield so that they could watch him slaughter the Macedonians. Darius was disastrously defeated and fled for his very life, and his family was taken captive.

Alexander continued to march east to Damascus. He took the city, and then he sent his commander on to Hamath, and Hamath fell. Syria became a part of the Macedonian Empire. Alexander then went south and took Sidon. He moved on to Tyre and besieged the city. Remember, Nebuchadnezzar had besieged Tyre for fourteen years and had never gotten inside the walls. Some of the Assyrian emperors had done no better. Alexander destroyed the Tyrean navy, placed his own ships around the island, built towers on the ships, and fired arrows from them into the city, thus keeping the soldiers on the city walls preoccupied. In the meantime, he assembled his armies and everybody else he could muster, gathered all the bricks and stones and rubble left over from the destruction of a city on the mainland, threw this into the water, and built a causeway spanning the half-mile between the mainland and the island. He marched his troops across, set up battering-rams, knocked the wall down, and destroyed Tyre-leveled it -and deported the entire population. The city has never existed since; the site is nothing but a barren rock today. He did all this in six months. Through Zechariah, God had said this would happen, that He would dispossess Tyre.

Alexander continued south and conquered the four Philistine city-states. At Gaza he was wounded. He was so angered that he destroyed the city, leveled it. He deported 30,000 of the people, sent them off into slavery. Alexander the Great, as you know, was crazy. He inherited his insanity from his mother. He was totally unpredictable, showing great mercy and compassion at times, and at other times, for no reason at all, leveling cities and deporting entire populations.

He marched into Egypt, and the Egyptians welcomed him with open arms (They did not like the Persians, either.), and made him a Pharaoh. In fact, they made him a god, and they erected a shrine to him.

Then he turned again to the north, with the intention of destroying Jerusalem, because while he was at Tyre he had asked the Jews for help, and they had refused. They would not supply food and materiel to his men as they besieged the city, and he was enraged, absolutely enraged. His pathological history, throughout his conquest of Greece and Persia, was that this sort of opposition threw him into absolute insanity. He was bent upon destroying the city. Now look at verse 8:

**But I will camp around My house because of an army, Because of him who passes by and returns; And no oppressor will pass over them any more,** [Literally, "And the one who oppresses will not pass over them any more,"] **For now I have seen with My eyes.**

The Jews had absolutely nowhere to turn. In the past, their pattern had been to turn to Egypt or Assyria or somebody else for help. But now they had nowhere to turn. The Persians were in full rout-Darius by this time was traveling east as rapidly as he could to try to regroup his forces. The Egyptians had already sided with the Macedonians. So the Jews had nobody they could turn to for help.

Now, we know that Jerusalem was spared in some miraculous way. Alexander the Great was on his way to destroy it, but he passed it by-and we do not know why. Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived shortly after Jesus was crucified, tells us that as Alexander came over the pass which leads down into Jerusalem, at the spot where you can first catch sight of the temple, he saw a small group of priests standing--no army; just priests. One of them was a man who is mentioned in the book of Nehemiah--Jaddua, a well-known high priest in Israel. Jaddua was standing there with a scroll in his hand. And Alexander the Great, who showed mercy to no man, fell on his knees before the high priest. Later, when he was asked why, he said that when he was in Macedonia he had a dream, and in that dream he saw the high priest, dressed in the miter and the white robe. Now, there is no way of knowing if Josephus' account is true or not; but we do know that Jerusalem was spared. Josephus goes on to tell us that Jaddua unrolled the scroll of Daniel and read Alexander chapters 7, 8, and 11--the predictions that Alexander would come, and that he would be a world conqueror. But for whatever reason, Alexander bypassed Jerusalem. He lived only for about eight more years--he had a very brief life--but throughout his life he always showed mercy and compassion and reverence for the Jews.

Let me ask you a question (and I ask this of myself as well): What are we counting on when we are oppressed? Very often we stand in the same place as Jerusalem. There is an oppressor coming, and we do not have any defenses. God, for one reason or another, has stripped us bare; there is no one we can count upon. What do we do? Isaiah says, in another context, "In quietness and rest shall be your strength" Our tendency is to defend ourselves, to marshal somehow what small resources we have and meet the oppressor, to act, to do something. We say we have to act on our own behalf; no one will save us if we do not save our self! You know that famous verse: "God helps those who help themselves." I often ask people to find that for me in the Bible. It is not in the Bible. That is a lie, right out of the pit of hell! As a matter of fact, the Bible says that God helps those who are helpless. It is the unfit who survive, those who are thrown back on the mercy and the strength of God, not those who try to defend themselves. God has demonstrated in history his ability to defend his people, and he will defend us. I do not care how unjust the accusations are- and you may have a terribly unjust employer, your children may be unjustly accusing you, or your husband, or wife, or neighbors, or employees. We do not have to defend ourselves. We can explain ourselves, but we do not have to defend ourselves. God will fight for us.

When I was in the Army, I had the joyous experience of being sent to Louisiana on "Operation Sagebrush." I never could figure out why they called it "Operation Sagebrush," for we did not see a single sage bush the whole time we were there! All it did was rain, from October to February. I was just a few miles from home (Dallas, Texas), but I could not get home even for Christmas, and I was homesick. It rained constantly. We stood in six inches of mud, slept in it, got it in our mess kits--mud everywhere.

On top of it all, I had a company commander who, for some reason or other, got on my case. I never could figure out what I had done to him. He was an enormous man, about 6'5", with red hair, and he would get flid when he

got angry. And every day I did something wrong. I tried my best to please the man. I did what I was told--probably not much more--but I did what I was told. I worked hard, I did everything I could, but he just stayed on my back day after day after day. I can remember so many times walking away from his tent, simply burning with resentment, just furious. Because often I was accused of things that I had no control over, and it seemed to me that he was completely unjust. And on top of that, the man was totally incompetent. It seems twice as bad when you sense that the person oppressing you is incompetent. We really had our struggles!

I had a Christian friend there who is a Roman Catholic. He is now a policeman in New York City, one of New York's "finest". He kept bringing me back to the Word, and encouraging me to go talk to the Captain in humility rather than in anger. Finally, on the strength of his encouragement, and also that of a couple of other men, I did so. I told the Captain how I felt, and tried to explain my point of view.

In the middle of our conversation he said, "Why are you doing this? Why would you take the time to talk to me like this? What is it you feel toward me, that you would say this?" I mustered up my courage in the Lord and told him of my own Christian commitment and concern for him as a person. And you know, two rather remarkable things occurred. First, his attitude toward me completely changed. It does not always work out this way, but in this case it did. In fact, he seemed positively embarrassed. And second, three weeks after that conversation, he was removed from the unit, sent someplace else, and replaced with another man.

Now, at times God may want us to submit to an intolerable situation and hang in there by faith, and he will strengthen us to do it. But at other times he will remove the person. But in either case, God will meet our needs. God will fight for us. We do not have to be defensive; he will fight for us. And for once in her history, this was the attitude Israel had when Alexander came. They really had no option--they had to trust God! And God delivered them. The oppressor passed by and returned, but he did not lay a finger on the temple. I am sure they must have thought, "Oh, no, not again! We just got it rebuilt!" But he passed by and did not touch it. Because in quietness and in trust was their confidence. They were not fighting for themselves.

That first section of the chapter deals with the deliverance of the city; the next section deals with the demeanor of the King who is coming. Perhaps you have wondered why Zechariah would inject at this point the prophecy of the coming of Messiah. It is because his manner, his demeanor, illustrates the attitude which allows God to deliver us. I am sure you have wondered why Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Notice what Zechariah says in verse 9:

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation...**

In the NASV, the margin note reads, "He is vindicated and victorious," and I believe that translation is to be preferred. Jesus had every right in the world to be King of Israel. It was his right by appointment; it was his right by prophetic utterance. Jesus was the King. But he never insisted on that right. Isaiah says that he did not "cry aloud in the street"--he did not raise up his voice, did not insist that everyone recognize who he was. He did not jump up and down and scream, "I'm the king! Treat me like one!" He came into Jerusalem--how? On a donkey. He was vindicated, and he was victorious. He won. But the text labors to underscore the fact that he came in on a donkey. Notice the last lines in verse 9:

**...Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt [a young donkey], the foal of a donkey.**

Why does Zechariah say that? We know now that he is underscoring the fact that it was a donkey and not a mule. A mule is a cross between a horse and a donkey. Mules are large, imposing beasts, and often kings rode on mules for just that reason. But kings do not ride on donkeys. Saul did, because they did not have any horses in Israel. Absalom did, because even in David's time they did not have horses. But Solomon did not ride on a donkey; he rode on a horse. He imported horses from Egypt, because they more befitted a king. Kings ride on horses! Whoever heard of a king riding a donkey? And particularly a little bitty donkey! Can you imagine Jesus riding into Jerusalem--the King--with his feet dragging the ground, riding this somber-faced little donkey, with its floppy ears? Zechariah says he was vindicated and he was victorious. Do you see why? He was humble. He did not insist on

his rights; he let God fight for him.

Now, I know the way I set about getting my rights! I mount my white stallion, my armor on, my lance at the ready, and I charge! That is the way to get your rights, right? Wrong. You go in on a donkey, unarmed. That is the way Jesus secured his rights. You may have to go in and talk to someone this week, someone who is abusing you or mistreating you and taking away your rights. You need to get off your charger and get on your donkey. That is how you are vindicated and victorious.

But we do not like that. Tim Timmons, who spoke at the Christian Family Life Seminar held at PBC this past weekend, said that people would come to him for counseling, and he would set forth the biblical principles whereby their problems could be solved, and they would say, "Isn't there another way?" There is no other way! We are like the man who was on top of an apartment house fixing a television antenna. He slipped and slid down the roof. As he went over the edge, he grabbed hold of the gutter. He was hanging there, fifty feet above a concrete patio, screaming for help, but nobody heard him. His grip was beginning to loosen, so he looked heavenward and shouted, "Is there anybody up there who can help me?" A deep bass voice came out of the sky: "I'll help you." The man said, "What do I do?" The voice said, "Let go." So the man said, "Is there anybody else up there who can help me?" We do not like to do it God's way! I do not want to get on that donkey; I want to put my armor on and ride my white charger. But notice verse 10

**And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, And the horse from Jerusalem; And the bow of war will be cut off.**

Now, the Lord is not talking about cutting off the armaments of Israel's enemies, but of Israel herself. And that is what he does to us--he takes away our armament so that we cannot fight, so that he can speak peace to the nations:

**And He will speak peace to the nations; And His dominion will be from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.**

He will reign, he will vindicate us, he will set things right. And it is all on the basis, verse 11 tells us, of the blood of the covenant, the covenant that God made with his people from the very beginning: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." It was sealed with the blood of animals, and eventually with the blood of Jesus Christ himself. At the last supper, when Jesus took the cup, he said, "This is the blood of the new covenant." The writer of Hebrews calls it "the eternal covenant". This is the kind of Lord we have. He is committed to being our God, and this passage tells us that his eyes are upon us; he sees us and knows our needs, and he will vindicate us and set things right. We do not have to fight. We can explain, but we do not have to fight. He will fight for us. Verse 12:

**Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope; This very day I am declaring that I will restore double to you. For I will bend Judah as My bow, I will fill the bow with Ephraim. And I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece; And I will make you like a warrior's sword.**

The interesting thing about this passage is that the Greeks were no problem to the Jews at the time Zechariah made this prophecy. This was written about 490 B.C., or 480 B.C., during the time when Persia and Greece were at war. The famous battles of Marathon and Thermopylae and Salamis all took place during this time. But they were wars of aggression on the part of Persia. Greece was apparently not a threat to Israel. And Alexander the Great was a Macedonian, not a Greek. It was many, many years after this, about 300 B.C., during the Seleucid empire, that the descendants of Alexander became the enemy of Israel. But long before they became a threat to the nation, Zechariah said, "I am going to raise up your sons and strengthen them against the Greeks." In other words, God says, I will not only strengthen you now, for whatever faces you this week, but also for threats which you do not anticipate--the latent forces in your life and in the world that you are not even aware of. I will take care of you there, as well.

I was watching Sesame Street last week (one of my favorite programs), and the Muppets were trying to defend

their cookies against the Cookie Monster. It was a very stressful situation-they were waiting for the Cookie Monster to show up, and sure enough, he shows up! It is a very tense time, but they save their cookies. They turn and begin congratulating one another-and while they are congratulating themselves, some big, hairy beast comes up behind them and grabs all the cookies! I thought, "How like life! You think you've got your problem licked, and ail of a sudden, some big, hairy monster you didn't anticipate at all slips up behind you and grabs the cookies!" God says, "I'm ready for that, too."

As this chapter continues, there is a very martial scene of Israel marching in triumph. But you notice that it is God who does it all, verses 14 and 15:

**Then the Lord will appear over them, And His arrow will go forth like lightning; And the Lord God will blow the trumpet, And will march in the storm winds of the south. The Lord of hosts will defend them. And they will devour, and trample on the sling stones; And they will drink, and be boisterous as with wine; And they will be filled like a sacrificial basin, Drenched like the corners of the altar.**

All this was fulfilled in the Maccabean revolt, when Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers delivered Israel from the Greeks for a time. It was fulfilled historically then, but it is fulfilled in our lives spiritually at any time. Verse 16:

**And the Lord their God will save them in that day As the flock of His people; For they are as the stones of a crown, Sparkling in His land. For what comeliness and beauty will be His!**

Not "theirs," but "His"! Look in the NASV margin. "What comeliness and beauty will be His." Whose? The Lord's. In the book of Revelation we are pictured as casting our crowns at his feet. Do you know why? The crowns, I am sure, are symbolic, and are intended to remind us that throughout eternity we will say, "Any reward we have coming to us for anything worthwhile we have accomplished in this life belongs to him, not to us. He did it. The beauty, the strength, are his." What foe do you face this week? Remember, he is the One who has promised to defend you.

Father, we are reminded of another prophet who said, "You come like a victorious warrior. You will be quiet in your love." We thank you today for that unseen, quiet, and yet known and experienced way in which you work in our lives. Defend us this week, for we ask in your name, Amen.

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