

The Triumphant Word Of God

by Steve Zeisler

Two of the most important spokesmen for God, prophets of this age—especially to people whose native tongue is English—are John Stott and the late C.S. Lewis. Both learned of life and Christianity in essentially the same milieu, although Lewis died in the early 1960's. They both ministered during the middle decades of the twentieth century in a profound way. I'm grateful to God for their ministry; their works are among those I appreciate and recommend most often.

When you read their works, though, you will recognize that C.S. Lewis and John Stott are very different in their style of teaching. Stott majors in Bible exposition that is profound and yet piercingly clear; his messages are direct, unadorned, logical, orderly and persuasive. C.S. Lewis, on the other hand, attempted almost no formal exposition of the Scripture, yet he is unparalleled in his creativity of expression, philosophical depth, and genius for illustration. What these two men share in common with all prophets of every age is an undiluted commitment to the truth of God in Scripture, a willingness to say, without compromise, what God has said, to declare, in Lewis' phrase, "mere Christianity" as it really is. They have not compromised with the academic fashion, or the popular culture of the day. There is no skipping over the hard parts, but rather a forthright declaration of truth.

A couple of weeks ago we embarked on a study series on the ministry of the prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, who prophesied after the time of Israel's exile. This morning we begin our study on the book of Zechariah. Both he and Haggai, whose book we studied these past two weeks, were fellow-countrymen and contemporaries; their message came out of the same milieu. When we read their books we will realize that they were different from one another, however. They were different from one another in the same way that John Stott and C.S. Lewis are different from one another. Haggai's book, like Stott's works, is direct, logical and persuasive. Chapter 1 of Haggai could probably be summed up in the words, "Disobedience leads to misery." His words are direct and to the point. What he says is obvious, yet profound.

Zechariah, on the other hand, is a little like C.S. Lewis. Zechariah is an artist, a visionary who declares the truth forthrightly, but he does so by pictures, by describing his visions of extraordinary things that communicate to us the heart and the mind of God. In his books, Lewis retells the story of the Garden of Eden by transporting it to the planet Venus, he describes the work and majesty of Jesus Christ by depicting him as a golden lion living in the land of Narnia. Zechariah is a bit like that. He had visions of majestic lampstands, angelic charioteers, flying scrolls; visions that upon examination, tell us something of God's heart and his purposes. I hope we will grow to appreciate this prophet's message in the weeks ahead.

The book of Zechariah falls into a rather obvious two-part division. The first eight chapters of the book are dominated by a series of eight visions that Zechariah saw and then related for the sake of individuals of his day. Yet, in content, these visions cover all of history, and describe its control by spiritual forces. Chapters 9 through 14 then go on to include oracles and dramas addressed to nations rather than to individuals. These, too, cover human history until the end. Both sections are filled with references to the Messiah, wonderful descriptions of the first and Second Coming of Jesus, and how our Lord is the glorious answer to the needs of the fallen race of Adam. Charles Feinberg has said, "Where else in all the range of prophetic revelation can we find such abundant detail concerning Messianic truth in such a small compass as here?" Zechariah talks about Jesus Christ in an exciting way.

Like our contemporary prophets, Lewis and Stott, Haggai and Zechariah, these contemporaries of the sixth century B.C., were also committed to the truth of God in Scripture. They had the highest possible view of the Word of God. They were determined to say what God had said in clear terms, and they refused to compromise with the age in which they lived. When we finish this morning I will urge you to examine what it means to you to have the Word of God as your heritage, to be able to hear and believe, to know, to count on, to declare God's

words. The Bible is a magnificent gift, one that this age—and this congregation—needs to examine. We need to ask ourselves whether in fact we treasure this deposit as much as we should. We need to do this for a couple of reasons. Today, theological arguments and debates abound among scholars, as well as ordinary-thinking Christians, about the nature of scripture, and what we ought to believe about it. Even among evangelicals there are strong proponents of the notion that the Bible is, in fact, sown with errors, and that it is only marginally trustworthy at best.

In this church we are more likely to encounter a second problem, one of obedience rather than formally questioning of the Bible's inspiration. We may believe the Bible to be inerrant—but at the same time, for the convenience of our flesh, we feel free to set aside what it says. We say we believe what scripture says, yet in practice we deny it. That is a widespread problem as well today.

These prophets, these sixth-century B.C. spokesmen for God, addressed these issues forthrightly. God's Word is powerful; it is unailing; it is eternal. We need to believe the right things about it, both formally and in the depths of our heart. A passage in Haggai 1 makes a very penetrating statement to the heart of today's theological debate over the inerrancy issue. Listen to these words (Hag. 1:12):

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people showed reverence for the Lord.

In that day, at that moment, as the prophet preached, the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of the prophet. They felt no freedom to separate the two, to somehow filter out God's message, to jettison certain of the pronouncements of scripture, as if God's voice and the literal words of the prophet could somehow be separated. In their experience they could not. It was this insistence that the words of the Bible and God's voice go together, this combination, that produced the beautiful reverence for God that followed. We cannot leave the words behind; we cannot somehow obey God's voice and not obey his words. An errant Bible cannot give a reliable message.

Chapter 1 of Zechariah addresses this problem of claiming to believe God's word but, in fact, disobeying it. Zechariah 1:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the prophet, the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo, saying, "The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Return to Me," declares the Lord of hosts, " that I may return to you," says the Lord of hosts. "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Return now from your evil ways and from your evil deeds." ' But they did not listen or give heed to Me, declares the Lord. [Then some penetrating questions from the mouth of the prophet. These guys were good at asking questions!] Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not My words and My statutes, which I commended My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, "As the Lord of hosts purposed to do with us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'"

A commandment is given, and the point of command is very obvious: "Return to Me, says the Lord." And that commandment is buttressed by a promised result: "that I may return to you." This message, this commandment has not gone out of style any time since. God is saying to this age, "Return to me." He is saying to individuals in this room, "Return to me, that I may return to you." God longs to know us, to be in intimate fellowship with us, to erase the distance that may have grown between him and us.

"Return to Me, say the Lord." This command is set in a context of history that gives it even more force. God says, "Consider the experience of your fathers. Consider the experience of those in earlier generations." Zech. 1:2: "I was very angry with your fathers." Zech. 1:4, "Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, 'Return to Me,' but they did not give heed or listen to Me, declares the Lord. They failed at the very

point at which I am directing you now. Do not be like them."

I don't know how the statement, "Return to Me," strikes you at this moment. I don't know what distance exists between you and God, if any. Some in this room are like the prodigal son. You have made dozens, scores, hundreds of decisions, perhaps, to put one foot in front of the other and walk further and further away from the house of your Father. You have chosen to associate with the wrong kind of people, to spend your time and money on the wrong things. The spiral continued downward; decision after decision was made until finally you awoke to realize you were feeding pigs; you were hungry and debased. Then, perhaps, you heard the Word of God, as Zechariah spoke it, "Return to Me." You looked back and saw all the territory you had traversed a little at a time, one small decision after another. Yet the prodigal son returned to his Father's embrace.

Or maybe you are more like Peter. Peter had the utmost confidence in himself. He was determined to serve God, to stand with his Lord no matter what. In a shattering moment, the briefest span of time, however, his whole world fell apart. In abject failure he denied his Lord and publicly shamed himself. Peter too awoke one morning to realize that he had failed, to find himself distant from the Lord. But he returned. There is that great picture on the beach by the Sea of Galilee when Jesus ministered to Peter and set him back on his feet. His failure came swiftly and unexpectedly. Although everything seemed to be going right, all of a sudden he gave in to temptation and found his best plans shattered. Maybe that is your experience. But the word remains: Do not be like earlier generations that failed to heed the Lord's command, "Return to Me."

To further strengthen his argument, Zechariah recalls what happened to the earlier generation that did not listen: "But did not My words and my statutes, which I commanded My servants the prophets, overtake your fathers? Then they repented and said, 'As the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us.'" They repented, but only after a great sorrow had befallen them; they repented after their city was besieged and burned, the people starved and exiled; they repented when it cost them a great deal. I am reminded of the television commercial for oil filters. The hard-eyed salesman says, "Buy my oil filter and pay me now, or have your engine blow up and pay me later." That is what Zechariah is reflecting on here. You have an opportunity to return now. Don't make the choice of letting your engine blow up and then have to return.

The words that hit me hardest in this passage are not so much Zechariah's directive to return, that familiar call of God for people to repent, but what the prophet says about the overtaking, unfailing word of God. It is on this basis that Zechariah urges them to return: because of what God has said, his promises and determinations will never fail. We are dealing with principles that are inviolable, and for that reason it is a very serious business. Look at the penetrating questions of Zech. 1:5: "Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?" The rebel leaders of an earlier age who didn't want to hear God's prophets, the ones who thought they knew better, who believed that alliances with Egypt would save them, who believed they could continue in their hypocrisy and laugh at God and get away with it, where are they? Well, they're dead. Even the prophets, those who were godly spokesmen of an earlier age, were no longer around.

When I was 16, I spent an evening in the company of a group of young people listening to Jim Rayburn, the man who founded Young Life. That organization has had a profound impact on ministry to young people. Though Jim Rayburn was nearing the end of his ministry by that time, he still had fire in his eyes; he was talking to high-schoolers and he was loving it. But Jim Rayburn isn't around any more. If I had staked my faith on an individual, I would have been foolish, because prophets don't last.

Prophecy does last; the words last; the truth, the statements of God, the determinations the Lord makes, those last. But the individuals don't last; rebel leaders don't last; they die and are taken over by the next generation of fools who swing the pendulum to the other extreme and advocate another mistake to replace the mistake of the last age. Even godly prophets do not last. What does last, God says, are "My words and My statutes which I commanded the prophets." Those never fail. The promises of God are always true.

History can be observed both linearly and cyclically. History moves linearly; it began at a point and will end at

another point. Significant events take place during the course of history, significant breakthroughs when God establishes something new, or advances us on our way to the day of judgment. All along that line the events that are important are described by God, predicted by God, analyzed by God. It is the scripture that makes sense of history. It is the scripture that gives us the capacity to anticipate without fear. It is the unfailing word of God that tells us about our age and its needs, describes the future, and analyzes the past. We can't make sense of the flow of history from beginning to end unless we have this Word of God.

In another sense, history is cyclical. The same problems come up again and again. Empires rise and fall for the same reasons as before. Oppressive regimes are replaced by anarchy, which is replaced again by repression, which is replaced again by anarchy. I had the horrible experience this last Christmas of having my children tell me that I am just like my father when it comes to telling corny jokes. I used to groan and shake my head when my father told them. Yet history has repeated itself again. My children groan and say, "You're doing the same thing!"

History is cyclical. In the same way that God's word describes linear history, history as it unrolls from beginning to end, scripture describes the cycles of human events. This helps us understand why in the world we are making the same mistake over again. Scripture provides the only remedy that breaks up this cycle of foolishness—that allows individuals to escape the cycle of doom. Scripture enables people to stand for something else, to be different and to gain freedom thereby. "My words and my statutes which I commanded my servants the prophets" don't fail. Isaiah said, "All flesh is grass, in its loveliness like the flower of the field . . . The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words shall not pass away." Galatians has a warning passage in the sixth chapter that is quite like the warning that comes in the first paragraph of Zechariah. (Gal. 6:7-10):

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially those who are of the household of faith.

There is a chilling note to verse 7: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked." If God has committed himself to something he will not be laughed at. If he has made a promise no one will ever fault him for failing in his promise. If he has declared himself opposed to sin and unrighteousness, then sin and unrighteousness will be rooted out of human history. God will not fail. No one will ever laugh at him. No one will ever point at God's declared intentions and describe him as a failure. "Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." Nobody gets away with anything. That is the heart of what Zechariah is trying to say to us. God's word triumphs. He speaks and it comes to pass. We need to be people who not only have the highest theological and prophetic view of scripture, but people who also recognize in our daily walk, in the choices we make, whether or not we want to obey God's word. We need to recognize the unfailing quality of the word of God.

Take a moment to think about this this morning. Examine yourself regarding the Bible you are holding in your hand. What do you think about it? Do you hear it as God's word? Do you listen to it? Are you committed to the truth it contains? Do you think that God may yet be mocked, that what he says won't come true? If our lives give evidence of disbelief let us repent now and return to the Lord.

Our Lord, we realize that for centuries men and women have died for the sake of the Bible, died to write its words, died to preserve them, died to translate them, died to spread them abroad; people who recognize Zechariah's message that what is contained here is wisdom and truth, the world as it really is; people who recognize that your promises are certain and your judgments are also certain. Lord, we pray that you will convict us if we have treated the prophetic word of God lightly in any way, and we ask you to change us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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