

# Wickedness Without It's Mask

by Steve Zeisler

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In the three years following World War 11, the modern state of Israel was brought into being. Interestingly enough, some of the most vociferous opposition to this came from Orthodox Jews. Communities of the most fundamental sects of the Jews opposed the formation of Israel, and they did so for two reasons, basically. They considered it blasphemous that Godless Jews, unrighteous (non-Orthodox) men and women, should again control the Holy Land. Secondly, they believed a new Jewish nation to be a dangerous thing. Jews were responsible to stand for the Lord, to be a light to all the nations, and when they had broken that covenant and failed that responsibility in the past they were brought into judgment. That pattern had repeated itself time after time. (World War 11 was perhaps the most terrible example of such judgment.) So these Orthodox Jews who opposed the formation of the state of Israel were concerned that if the responsibility to occupy the land was taken up again by the Jews, that failure would make them liable to judgment again. On that basis these Jews held that there ought not be a Jewish state in the Holy Land until the Messiah had come.

Recall that the prophet Zechariah and his contemporaries ministered to the nation of Israel when the Jews were returning to the land following an earlier dispersion, the Babylonian captivity. The same issues were at stake for these returning exiles to whom the prophets Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi preached. It must also have seemed to some of those exiles that to return to the nation without renewed hearts, without being cleansed of their sins, would be both blasphemous and dangerous; that unless there was some hope that the unrighteousness that existed in the nation would be done away with that they too would misrepresent God and therefore bring judgment on themselves again. So the three visions of Zechariah that we are going to consider this morning (the final three in a series of eight that comprise most of Zechariah 1-6) were given for the sake of the ordinary Jewish exiles, not leaders, as some of the previous visions were, but ordinary people who had returned to the land, wondering if they could make a success of it this time, wondering if the burden of being Jews, of occupying the land God had given them, taking on that terrible responsibility and facing that danger, was worth it all. Was there any hope of success? they wondered.

One such group of exiles is mentioned in Zechariah 6:10, and the visions we are going to consider this morning may very well have been for them:

**"Take an offering from the exiles, from Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedadiah; and you go the same day and enter the house of Josiah the son of Zephaniah, where they have arrived from Babylon."**

This group may have been asking themselves, "Are we doomed forever to find that our own sinful practice, our own sinful inclination, will make us rebel against God and force him to judge us again? Is there some hope that we can be purified so that we can be successful in serving him in this nation?" These are proper concerns for Christians as well. We will see from these visions that there is hope indeed. The first vision is in Zechariah 5:1-4:

**Then I lifted up my eyes again and looked, and behold, there was a flying scroll. And he said to me, "What do you see?" And I answered, "I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits." Then he said to me, "This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land; surely everyone who steals will be purged away according to the writing on one side, and everyone who swears will be purged away according to the writing on the other side. I will make it go forth," declares the Lord of hosts, "and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones."**

This vision addresses the problem of thieves and those who swear falsely by the Lord's name. The vision is

saying that the unrighteous, the wicked, those who are a blight on Israel will be purged from the nation by God. The word that is translated "purge" also means to cleanse or to purify. God will take action by dealing with individual acts of sin to create, to purify, to purge his nation and make it what it ought to be. And he will do so by using the powerful, frightening potential of his own word. That is the point of the flying scroll that Zechariah saw. God's word is his agent of purification. We have the word of God printed on pages that turn, but in Zechariah's day Scripture was written on scrolls that rolled up. Zechariah saw an enormous, unrolled scroll, clearly seen by everyone, flying in its power above the nation to do its work. The scroll included the law of God, obviously, the commandments to steal not, to not swear in the name of the Lord and then fail to keep that vow. It also included a curse, we are told here (Zech.5:3), the recognition in Scripture that the wages of sin is death. Zechariah saw the powerful, active word of God in its cleansing work.

There is a New Testament counterpart to this vision of a scroll. Several New Testament writers use the figure of a sharp sword to picture the Word of God. John the Revelator had a vision of Jesus astride a white horse, the word of God proceeding from his mouth as a deadly sword to smite his enemies. In Ephesians, Paul talks about "the sword of the Spirit," the sword wielded by the Spirit, "which is the Word of God." Hebrews makes a very penetrating statement to the same effect: "For the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do." (Heb. 4:12) Whether we see it as a flying scroll going about the land purging wickedness, or whether we see it in the figure of a sharp two-edged sword that divides soul and spirit, the word of God cuts to the quick of our experience; it is a scalpel in the hand of God to remove wickedness. Whether we see it in either figure, the point is the same: God's word is very serious business. It is no ordinary piece of literature. It is not the thinking of man, recorded over a period of time. The word of God is powerful to do its work on its own.

Now the second vision. Zech.5:5:

**Then the angel who was speaking with me went out, and said to me, "Lift up now your eyes, and see what this is, going forth." And I said, "What is it?" And he said, "This is an ephah going forth."**

The angel's answer was very helpful to Zechariah but it doesn't help us much. An ephah was actually a measure, a five-gallon container used to store flour or grain. As such it was as common in the kitchen of a sixth century B.C. Israelite as Tupperware is in our kitchens today. Let us see what is the significance of this ephah, this container. Zech.5:6

**Again he said, "This is their appearance in all the land [and behold, a lead cover was lifted up]; and this is a woman sitting inside the ephah." Then he said, "This is Wickedness!" And he threw her down into the middle of the ephah and cast the lead weight on its opening. Then I lifted up my eyes and looked, and there two women were coming out with the wind in their wings; and they had wings like the wings of a stork, and they lifted up the ephah between the earth and the heavens. And I said to the Angel who was speaking with me, "Where are they taking the ephah?" Then he said to me, "To build a temple for her in the land of Shinar; and when it is prepared, she will be set there on her own pedestal."**

In the first vision the word of God ordered itself to deal with wrongdoers, with sinful actions in the homes of sinners in the land of Israel. In this case the issue at stake is the very principle of rebellion itself, not mere actions or sinful deeds. but the very inclination to sin. This is the nature we are born with that makes us love ourselves more than we love God, that inclines us to do what we ought not to do, to hurt others and to live in blasphemy and rebellion against God. In this vision, that very principle is being removed from the land. What an unexpected place to find such wickedness! Zechariah must have been startled to learn that in the very foodstuffs, the very air he breathed virtually, that in the most ordinary circumstances the principle of rebellion was present. This should be startling to us too.

As we remember that it is the returned exiles who are in view here, the point of this vision was to give them hope that the ultimate destiny of Israel would be to fulfill the promise of God to Abraham that Israel would ultimately be purged of its wickedness, that the principle of rebellion would be removed from its midst, that in the final analysis the sons and daughters of Abraham would be the bold and righteous servants of God they were intended to be from the beginning. This is a prophecy about Israel's future. We know that there was another dispersion of the Jews, which occurred in the first century A.D. and following. But just recently the Jews who were scattered abroad in the world began to return to the land. So the fulfillment of the prediction concerning Israel, is yet future. But the Lord will keep his promises, therefore his people should step out in faith. It is right to take the dangerous step of doing what we ought to do because we are certain that eventually, in the final analysis, God has an answer for the problem of sin.

We can apply what we see in these visions in another way. We can recognize that what the nation of Israel went through depicts events in the life of faith of individual Christians. If there were homes in the nation of Israel that housed thieves and blasphemers, and those homes needed to be burned, purged and cleaned away, the same thing is true in our experience. We too have strongholds remaining in our personalities, areas in our lives, in our memories and in our choices that remain unrighteous, and they too need to be purged away; they too need the scalpel of the word of God applied to them. In Zechariah's vision of the removal of the sin nature itself, we are reminded of the work of God on our behalf to remove the sin nature from us.

I will never forget the time when I first understood Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount to the effect that my giving way to lustful thoughts and my giving way to anger pronounced me as guilty of adultery and murder as if I had done those very things. The powerful word of God penetrated my pride at that moment in a way that I can yet remember distinctly. As I realized the awful, crushing sense of my need for Christ, God's word did its work. I realized how much there was yet in me of sinful practice that I did not want to admit to, that I wanted to keep inside so that no one else could see.

God's word did its work in me in the same way that the nation in Zechariah's day experienced God's word doing its work.

Like me, you probably have been utterly startled to see that the principle of sin, the very inclination to sin, is present in the most mundane circumstances—as close to home as your kitchen. It is not the fact that we are under pressure that makes us sin. It is not what somebody else did to us that makes us sin; it is not somebody else's fault; it is not because of circumstances. There is something resident there; something that is so natural it is literally part of us. That is a very startling discovery. It is only as we come to Christ that the woman is removed to Babylon, that sin is no longer our identity, and we begin to believe that and live on that basis.

I would like to call your attention to a third thing about these visions. This should disabuse us of any naivete that may remain in us as to the issues at stake when we talk about sin and wickedness. This vision speaks of the land of Israel, and says that the vile woman who is wickedness herself will be removed to Shinar. As we study Scripture we know that there are only two nations, in effect—Israel and Shinar (Babylon). There are those who are the people of God, and those who are his enemies; those who are being saved and those who are perishing; those who are sons and daughters of Adam and those who are sons and daughters of Christ. It looks to us as though there are all kinds of people in the world—rich and poor, speaking various languages, those of different cultural backgrounds, those who come from various nations, etc. We think the world is filled with all kinds and varieties of people, yet in this sense there are really only two kinds. Despite all the other ways in which we differ, all of us ultimately are in one of two camps: we are either sons of Adam, or sons of God through Christ. That is one of the issues at stake here.

If we listen carefully and picture as clearly as we can, the events of these visions will deal with our tendency to be naive in these matters. Listen again to these words. Zech.4:5:

**"I will make it go forth," declares the Lord of hosts, "and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears falsely by My name; and it will spend the night within that house and consume it with its timber and stones. "**

By becoming a member of the church of Jesus Christ we are destined for purity. The first nation in view here will be purged, cleansed of its rebellion. That's what being a Christian is all about. God is not interested in making us polite, civilized, warm, well spoken, clean or neat. He wants to make us pure, to remove from our hearts whatever vestiges of rebellion remain. What we call foibles he calls sin, and he is determined by the power of his word to remove it from us. We ought not be naive about that. Being a Christian means that God is going to deal ruthlessly with what sin remains in us. His word enters our house, spends the night there minutely inspecting everything, takes enough time to be very certain in its evaluation, and then it burns to the ground the "timber and stone" of any remaining rebellion. Our Lord is ruthless about these things. If we are members of his nation then we will be made like his Son.

Consider again the easy naivete into which we fall as we think about the reality of evil. Zech.5:10:

**And I said to the angel who was speaking with me, "Where are they taking the ephah?" Then he said to me, "To build a temple for her in the land of Shinar; and when it is prepared, she will be set there on her own pedestal."**

The land of Shinar comes into biblical prominence first in Genesis 11. It was situated on the plain to the east of Israel, where men first built the massive ziggurat, the tower of Babel, that went to the sky, the symbol of human pride that said, "We don't need God. We can promote ourselves; we can handle life and worship ourselves." On that ancient foundation later was built the city of Babylon, from which these exiles had just returned. Throughout Scripture, Babylon and the events that took place there serve as a symbol of wickedness in concentrated form. In Revelation, John has a vision of the end of time in which he sees wickedness personified. He calls this by the name Babylon, which is located in Shinar. Rev.17:1-6:

**And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality." And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, and upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery, "Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Of The Abominations Of The Earth." And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of witnesses of Jesus. And when I saw her, I wondered greatly.**

In this vision John is seeing what Zechariah saw. This woman, the principle of sin, removed from the land of Israel and set on a pedestal in Shinar becomes at the end of history the great harlot, drunk with the blood of the saints.

By the way, in case this causes offense, there is a linguistic reason for choosing a woman to symbolize this. The word "wickedness" in Hebrew is grammatically feminine, so a female figure is used. For the same reason godly wisdom is depicted as a woman in Proverbs. This is not a sexist, anti-women diatribe going on here.

The graphic quality, the perversity, the violence of this scene is hard to escape, however. If we would but hear Zechariah's words we would stop being naive about what human wickedness, about what human beings are capable of when they are unrestrained. If men and women are determined to resist God's cleansing work, what do they become? In the future, when the division is clearer than it has ever been, so that righteousness is more thoroughly righteous and wickedness more thoroughly wicked, what would we expect to see? We would see wickedness on a pedestal in a temple, loved and worshipped.

There are some who take a "flower-child" approach to war, to national defense, etc. They say that if everybody is nice to everybody then everybody else will be nice, and urge—that less than profound thinking—as a basis for our national defense. People like that are always shocked when they tour Hitler's extermination camps. They realize

what human beings are capable of when power is concentrated and unrestrained and wickedness has its way. Some people like their religion shallow and filled with razzle-dazzle. They are always shocked to see a Jim Jones given power over hundreds of people who swallow poisoned Kool-Aid at his command. The potential for human evil, our ability to be cruel, violent and wicked, to worship rebellion, is frightening when it is given its way. Some ivory-tower legal theorists advocate that laws dealing with what they call "victimless crimes" be done away with. By this they mean doing away with laws against drugs, pornography, prostitution, etc. Those people too are shocked when they find out what child prostitutes have to live through, the psychological slavery, the beatings, the disease and perversity, the filth and degradation that is the lot of people who can no longer protect themselves. To call that a "victimless crime" is foolish and naive. It is called that only by people who cannot see, as Zechariah clearly saw, that those who resist God, those of the nation of Shinar, are capable of such terrible violence and wickedness that they will place these things on a pedestal.

It might be good to mention at this point also that since the issue is pedestals and temples, what is at stake here is the condition of people's hearts. You may have done in the past, actions that were violent and awful, but if you are part of the nation that will be purged then you can look forward to holiness and honor. People who are very prim and proper may yet be members of the nation Babylon who will find themselves capable of things they never believed they would do. In the final analysis, the issue is, where is your heart? What do you worship? That is the dividing line that determines which people we are among, the people of God or the people of his enemy.

The third vision in this last series comes in Zech.6:1-8, and it harkens back to chapter 1, and the very first of the eight visions that Zechariah saw. In that vision he saw angels on horseback, patrollers of the earth, standing in a ravine of myrtle trees and reporting to the angel of the Lord on the affairs of earth. In this last vision, there also are angels and horses, but this time the horses are proceeding from between bronze mountains, pulling the chariots of war, and eager to be about the business of accomplishing God's work. Describing the actions of these charioteers, Zech.6:8 says, "They have appeased my wrath in the land of the north." The angels of God in this vision are taking action, doing the purging, the cleansing of the resistance to sin that has been the highlight of what we saw in chapter 5.

Then in Zech.6:9 we come to the end of this long night and morning of Zechariah's visions. Here the prophet speaks to the delegation newly returned from Babylon. Zech.6:9:

**The word of the Lord also came to me saying, "Take an offering from the exiles, from Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah; and you go the same day and enter the house of Josiah the son of Zephaniah, where they have arrived from Babylon. And take silver and gold, make an ornate crown, and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Then say to him, 'Thus says the Lord of Hosts, "Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the Lord. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the Lord, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices." ' Now the crown will become a reminder in the temple of the Lord to Helem, Tobijah, Jedaiah, and Hen the son of Zephaniah. And those who are far off will come and build the temple of the Lord." Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And it will take place, if you completely obey the Lord your God."**

The delegation that had arrived with their questions and fears, wondering if the people who were called by God's name would ever be successful at what they had to do, wondering if evil would ever be dealt with, if unrighteousness could ever be purged from its stronghold among them, were allowed to see in this vision that the ultimate destiny of these things is God's victory over sin. Now they are given a chance to focus their attention where it must focus in any consideration of human events, and especially God's accomplishment on our behalf: they center their focus on Messiah. Throughout the prophets, one of the titles given to the Messiah to come is, "the Branch," the shoot from the stem of Jesse, this branch that grows up in dry ground where one would never expect it, this odd but powerful and remarkably fruitful branch on which everything depends ultimately.

Having been given hope, these exiles are now allowed to hear about, to see, to consider and worship the Messiah, though he had not come yet. They are being urged here to place their faith in the promise of Messiah, that their hope ultimately of making a success of a life of faith requires the centrality of the Messiah. So they are told to melt down the gift they had brought, to make a crown and to place it on the head of Joshua, the high priest of their day, and that that crown would continue as a reminder in the temple, a physical, touchable reminder, that they could go back to and focus their attention again on the Messiah. Joshua's namesake a few hundred years later would be not only high priest but King. He would wed the two offices together. He would be a high priest who would sit and rule on the throne of David; he would be the answer to the hope of human beings since the beginning. It is this reminder that these men made that perhaps cemented their faith, that allowed them, as they participated in making the crown, to believe that God would be triumphant and that sin would be defeated.

We are at a point in our service this morning where we are going to touch a reminder of our own. On the last night of his life, the Lord instituted a service of remembrance, that we should regularly take bread and eat it and remember that his body was broken for us; take a cup and drink it and remember that his blood was shed for us; that our life too is to be centered on the Messiah, the Branch who will build the temple, the Branch on whom everything depends. As we have opportunity now to continue our worship at the communion table, spend some time with the Lord, center your attention on him, realize that these physical reminders are to draw us near to him. Let us be thankful for the certainty that sin will be defeated finally, and that our Messiah, the sent one from God, will supply all that we need.

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