

# Return

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're starting today a new series in the book of Zechariah, which is quoted 11 times in the Gospel and alluded to more than 60 times between the Gospels and Revelation.

And so although it's not a book that's found in many preaching programs, and I'm not sure how many people here would have read all the way through Zechariah, actually, it's worth doing because it has good things, as all of God's Word does, good things to say to us.

So let me pray for us, and then we'll have a look at the Bible together. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you that it has good things to teach us about you, about what you promise us, and how we might live in response to you.

And we pray this morning that you would help us to understand your Word and to live in light of it, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're looking at the introduction of Zechariah, page 948.

Page 948. And the introduction to the book is only six verses long. And the introduction is all about repenting. In fact, if you've got your Bibles there, the word repent comes up in different ways in this passage.

[ 1 : 15 ] In verse 3, it says, return. Return to me. Verse 4, turn from your evil ways. And verse 6, repent.

Now those words, return, turn, and repent, they're all the same Hebrew word, which is what this book was originally written in, Hebrew. And they all mean repent.

Now the word repent literally means change your mind. So our eight-year-old daughter was going out to a friend's place the other day and she kept changing her clothes. I'd hate to think what she's going to be like as a teenager.

But that's repenting. Changing your mind and getting another outfit on or whatever. Now of course when it comes to God, it means changing our mind from living our way to living God's way.

Or changing our mind from not believing to believing. In other words, it involves a U-turn from going one way back the other way. Now there are some places where you shouldn't try a U-turn, like a narrow street.

[ 2 : 17 ] In fact, there's one couple which I feel sorry for. They tried a U-turn. Now here they're actually trying to turn south towards the bottom of the screen. Okay. So on the next slide, they get a bit further. But now they're starting to block traffic.

And to make things worse, the poor people. Next slide. You've got a gang of motorcycle riders coming down the street who then get blocked. And to add to that, you've got a religious procession coming down the street who gets blocked.

And on the next slide, then they all cheer when they finally get around. Woohoo! They've made it. They've done the U-turn. Now there are some places where you just shouldn't try to do a U-turn, like a narrow street.

But when it comes to God, you should always do a U-turn. He always permits U-turns. We are always to turn back to him.

And this is Zechariah's message in this introduction. But in order to understand what's happening here in this text, we need to understand the historical context. That is, what point in history does this book take place in?

[ 3 : 20 ] In fact, with all Old Testament books, it's worth asking, what's the story so far? Which is point one, verse one. It says, in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah, the son of Eru.

Now, that first verse, or first sentence there, gives us the historical context, doesn't it? It's the second year of Darius. Now, who is Darius, or Darius?

Well, he is the third king of Persia. But what's Persia got to do with Zechariah? I mean, Zechariah's a Jew. He's not even from the country, Persia. Well, it's here we need to remember our history.

You see, roughly 500 years before Zechariah, Israel was the superpower. The first king of Israel was, anyone? Saul. Yep.

Saul was the first king. And then came David and then Solomon. That's right. On the next slide, you can see the small purple bit is Saul's kingdom.

[ 4 : 26 ] And the gray bit extending up and down the coast, that's the land that David conquered. And the big bit, including the slightly brown shaded area at the top, that was the kind of border of Solomon's reign.

And they all, Solomon ruled over this. But at the heart of Israel was Jerusalem. And the heart of Jerusalem was the temple. Because God was at the temple.

And God ruled this kingdom through his king, Solomon. And these were the glory days. You know how when you think back to your own glory days? Well, for Israel, this was their glory days.

But of course, the people became complacent. King Solomon started marrying different women. Does anyone know how many women he ended up marrying? 700. Can you imagine how many wedding anniversaries he'd have to remember?

That's almost two a day. I have trouble remembering one. Okay. And then what happened was he actually started worshipping his wives' gods as well. So he worshipped God, the Lord, as well.

[ 5 : 29 ] But then he'd also worshipped a different God. And so he's double-minded in James' word from our second reading. He was having an each-way bet. And so God tore that kingdom away from Solomon.

Or actually from his family after Solomon died. So on the next slide, I think. Yep. The borders are reduced now. This is actually zoomed in. So the top half's gone. The bottom half's gone. And the kingdom is split in two.

The bottom purple part is the southern kingdom called Judah. And the top half keeps the name Israel. That's the northern kingdom. Okay. In the green part, the capital is Samaria.

And in the purple part, the capital is Jerusalem. And so that's what happened. But now in the northern kingdom, 19 kings followed Solomon.

And every single one of them was evil. In fact, if you read through the book of two kings, you have this sentence that repeats itself over and over again. It says, King so-and-so did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

[ 6 : 28 ] King so-and-so did evil in the eyes of the Lord. And it just keeps going on and on. Now God warned them that if they continued to do evil, then he would have to judge them. God warned them actually for 200 years.

That's pretty patient of God, isn't it? Sometimes I'm so impatient with my kids, they don't even get one warning. But after 200 years, the Assyrians were the next superpower on the world's stage.

And so God used the Assyrians to wipe out that northern kingdom in 722 BC. And the Assyrians took them off to exile, never to return to that land again.

In fact, on the next slide, we read from 2 Kings 17, Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom, the purple part, there were 20 kings that followed Solomon.

And there were a few rays of light. There were a couple kings in particular who really did follow God, like Josiah and Hezekiah. And so Judah lasted a little bit longer, though that was mainly because of God's promise to King David, if you remember.

[ 7 : 51 ]     God promised King David that one of his family members would always rule in Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom. But in the end, even Judah's kings were evil too.

And they refused to listen to God as well. And so again, on the next slide, Jeremiah says this. He says, The word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah. That was the purple southern kingdom.

He says, For 23 years, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened. And though the Lord has sent all his servants, the prophets, to you again and again, you have not listened or paid attention.

They said, Turn now each of you from your evil ways. Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them. But you did not listen to me, declares the Lord.

And you have provoked me with what your hands have made, the idols or statues, and you have brought harm to yourselves. Therefore, the Lord Almighty says this. Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, declares the Lord.

[ 8 : 55 ]     And I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn and everlasting ruin.

And so at this stage, Babylon is the next superpower and God uses them to take Israel, or rather Judah, into exile.

It's a rather depressing history, isn't it? But the lesson is to listen to God and repent. And it's a lesson Zechariah reminds them of, as we'll see in a moment.

You see, God did not want to judge his people. The Bible calls it his alien work. It's not what comes naturally to him. What comes naturally to him is to have mercy and to love.

But just like people who do wrong need to be punished, that's the way this world works, that's what justice is, well, God had to, after warning after warning, judge these people.

[ 9 : 52 ]     Yet God certainly was not about to abandon his promises to them. And so he made another promise through a couple of prophets called Jeremiah and Isaiah. And he promised that he would bring the Jews back to Judah to rebuild the temple, rebuild the city, rebuild the kingdom.

And so at this stage in history, Cyrus, the king of Persia, comes along and he conquers Babylon. And so in terms of the superpowers, we've had Israel, followed by Assyria, followed by the Babylonians, and then comes the Persians.

And of course, after the Persians comes the Greeks with Alexander the Great and then the Romans and so on. But Cyrus is the king of Persia. He rises to power. He takes over Babylon without much effort, actually.

And in 538 BC, Cyrus issues a decree that all people can return to their homeland, back to their own country. In fact, I think on the next slide, there's what's called a Cyrus cylinder.

It's in the British Museum. And in between those ridges are inscriptions or words. And it issues a decree from King Cyrus that says people can return to their homeland.

[ 11 : 00 ] And what you'd do is you'd roll it in ink and then you'd roll it out on some paper and the words would come out. And on it was the decree that people would return to their home, but on the condition that they pray for Cyrus for a long and happy life for him.

And so that's what happened to Israel. Israel returned to Judah. And Cyrus said, rebuild your temple so your God can dwell there and so you can pray to your God for me.

But life was not easy when they returned back to the land. They had to start from scratch. What's more, they faced great opposition to building the temple. The people in the north in Israel, what was Israel, the green part, if you remember the green kingdom, they caused all sorts of strife for the people in the south.

And so life was really tough, really tough, to the point where the work on the temple stopped altogether. And it's at this point that God sends two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to encourage the people to return, return to building the temple, return to building the city and so on.

And so here in Zechariah, this is his message. Return to me and I will return to you, he says in verse 3. Do you see that? We'll start at verse 2.

[ 12 : 17 ] He says, the Lord was very angry with your ancestors. We just saw that. Therefore, tell the people, this is what the Lord Almighty says. Return to me, declares the Lord Almighty, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.

And as I said, we've just heard about how God was angry with their forefathers. Zechariah didn't need to say any more than that. It's kind of like when we say September 11, we all know what that means, don't we?

We just have to say September 11, and we all know what that means. Well, Zechariah, all he had to say was God was angry with your ancestors. And they all knew why and what that had meant.

But then Zechariah calls the people to return. And as I said, the word for return is the same word for repent. But it's more than just repenting or changing your mind. There's a restored relationship on view.

God says, return to me. It's personal. And I'll return to you. And did you notice a promise that comes with it? If they return to God, God promises he will return to them.

[ 13 : 20 ] In fact, he's already taken the initiative to return to them by sending the prophets to encourage them to have a relationship with God. But how will God return to them? Well, by forgiving them and restoring them to a right relationship where God is their God and they are his people.

In my family, we have this ongoing struggle with one of our children in particular who doesn't seem to understand that she is not the parent. And so after asking her to do something the other day that she didn't want to do, she replied with, why should I have to do what you tell me to do when you never do what I tell you to do?

And then she added, you're not the boss of me. The problem is, I am. We gave birth to her, not her to us. And there's a fundamental difference, you see.

I'm the adult. She is not. And so too with God. There is a fundamental difference. God, we did not create the world. God did. God is God. We are not.

And so my daughter had to repent. She had to change her mind about who the boss was. She had to say sorry and turn back to me. And I forgave her. And then the relationship is restored, you see. And put back as it's meant to be.

[ 14 : 34 ] Where I am the parent whom she is to obey. And she is the child whom I am to love and care for. And this is what's on view here in Zechariah. The people are to return to God as God.

Saying sorry, turning back to him and treating him as God in their lives. And God promises if they do that, he will return to them in forgiveness. And restore them in right relationship.

But there is not only a promise of forgiveness if they return. There is also a warning if they don't. Do you see verse 4? He says, do not be like your ancestors. Which we saw on the slide.

To whom the earlier prophets proclaimed. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. But they would not listen or pay attention to me. Declares the Lord.

We saw that from Jeremiah, didn't we? And then he says, where are your ancestors now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees which I commanded my servants, the prophets, overtake your ancestors?

[ 15 : 37 ] Then they repented and said, the Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve. Just as he determined to do. Verse 6 in your Bibles there is in a new paragraph.

It shouldn't really be there. It's a continuation. It's still talking about the people who were in exile. They repented. We see that in the book of Lamentations, for example. But it was all too late. A judgment had already come.

And so Zechariah has this warning. He says, look, if you return to God, God will return to you. But if you do not listen to God, if you do not return to God, then look what happened to your forefathers who did not return.

Now, there are all sorts of warnings, like this next one on the next slide. Children left unattended will be sold to the circus. I've been tempted to deliberately leave my children unattended.

No, no, no. They're not that bad. And the next one, trespassers, violators will be shot. Survivors will be shot again. I think they're just being cheeky. Now, they're, you know, amusing warnings.

[ 16 : 42 ] But I tell you what, this one in Zechariah, there's nothing funny about it, is there? If they don't return to God, if they continue to refuse to listen to God, then what happened to their ancestors who refused to listen to God will happen to them as well.

There will be destruction and scorn and ruin, as we heard from Jeremiah. And so they are to return. They are to repent. But what are they to repent of?

Well, it wasn't worshipping statues as their forefathers did. The exile had pretty much cured them of that problem. But while they didn't worship statues, it seems they didn't completely worship God either.

Instead, it seems they worshipped themselves. That is, God was no longer the first or top priority in their lives. They were, and their concerns were. And we get a glimpse of this with Haggai.

So just turn back one page to the book of Haggai in your Bibles. Just turn back one page. Excuse me.

[ 17 : 46 ] Now, Haggai came just two months before Zechariah. So Zechariah came in the eighth month, and Haggai came in the sixth month. So, verse one. In the second year of King Darius of Persia, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel, son of Sheetal, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the high priest.

This is what the Lord Almighty says. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. And then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai. Is it a time for you to prepare yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin?

Now, this is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are never warm.

You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it. This is what the Lord Almighty says. Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, the temple, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured, says the Lord.

You see what the issue is in that time? They were busy with their own lives and their own houses and completely neglected God and his house. Now, at one level, there's nothing wrong with getting on with your own house and your own things.

[ 19 : 10 ] We all have life to live and we all have our own pressures and things we need to deal with. The issue, though, is that God was no longer the priority, which means God is no longer God in their lives.

I mean, that's what it means to be God, to be number one, to be the top priority. And he ought to be, since he made the world and gave his son Jesus to die for the world. But for the Jews, life was tough and they let that get in the way of building God's house, the temple.

It was simply easier to just look after yourself and your own house rather than trusting God and getting on with his work as well. And this is very much a 21st century Australian problem, isn't it?

Where we are God of our own life. But it's also a church problem, too. You see, life is not always easy for us. And so it is much easier to focus on ourselves and our own lives instead of trusting God.

It's much easier to make our needs and our wants our priority rather than God and his work the priority. Jesus said something similar about not worrying about what to eat or drink, but to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.

[ 20 : 23 ] And for those in Zechariah's day, to seek first the kingdom was to rebuild the temple because the temple was at the heart of the kingdom. Because that's where God promised to dwell and promised to rule from.

And so to abandon the temple was effectively to abandon God. Now, by the end of Haggai chapter 1, in the end of the sixth month, God works and moves in the hearts and spirits of the people and they do actually begin work on the temple.

But it seems their hearts have not fully returned to God because a month later, in the eighth month, Zechariah is sent to the people with that message, return to me and I will return to you.

You see, they may have returned to the land after the exile. They may have even returned to building the temple after Haggai. But their hearts had not yet returned to God. The relationship hadn't yet been restored.

And so God says, return to me. I don't want you to just go through the motions of building the temple. I want to be the priority in your hearts as well. This is what it means to be in God's kingdom.

[ 21 : 25 ] It means to be a people who have repented or turned back to God, who believe in his son Jesus as their king. It's what Di has promised to do this morning, to follow Jesus as her king.

And the king is the number one, isn't he? That's what the word king means. And so we are to follow Jesus as our king. Him and his work is to be priority in our lives.

And so can I say that I've actually been very encouraged by people who've done that here. I know many people here for whom God is their number one priority, for whom God's work is their number one priority.

Just let me give you a couple of examples. We've got a women's outreach event next Saturday night, the gingerbread house making thing. And that's God's work. That's building his kingdom.

And for one person, they joyfully asked me without prompting. They said, look, is there anything I can do to help you in the kitchen? Because they know that this event is important. It's God's work. It's a priority for them.

[ 22 : 28 ] For another person who's already booked holidays, they said, can I give you money towards it? Because they know it's God's work. It's important. It's a priority for them. Here are just two people in the last couple of weeks who have God and his kingdom as a priority in their lives.

Now, that will look different for each of us. And the way to tell is to really think about our hearts. You know, in our hearts, in our conscience, is God number one in our lives?

Or is there an area of life where we do what we want to do when we know we should be doing something that God wants us to do? And if there is an area that you're feeling guilty about this morning, then that's okay.

Just repent. Return to God as God in your life, and God will joyfully return to you. Because with God, it's always good to do U-turns. There is no street too narrow with him.

And when we draw near to God, he will draw near to us, as James said. Or in the words of Zechariah, when we return to him, he will return to us. And so let's keep making sure that God is priority number one in our lives.

[ 23 : 37 ] And if he is not, then repent. Return to him, and he will return to you. Amen. Amen. Amen.