

Judgement and Rest Realised

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[0 : 01] Well, it would be great if you could turn in your Bibles back to that first Bible reading. As Naomi said at the start of the service, we've been working our way through the book of Zechariah in the Bible, which is a unique book.

Someone was talking to me during the week and they were saying that they often asked Paul Barker to preach on this and he always declined. Now, I don't know if that just makes me stupid or silly, I don't know.

But it is a bit tricky, so why don't we pray? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do again thank you for your word as Naomi prayed a moment ago. And we do ask that you would help us to understand it.

But more than that, that you would help us to live it out, that we may be people who seek to please you because you have done so much for us in your son.

We ask it in his name. Amen. Well, when we were children, most of us had dreams of what we might become when we grew up.

[1 : 02] For one child, for Katie, aged 11, she said, I want to become a lawyer who argues cases because my dad says I'm good at arguing. I'm not sure her dad was being complimentary at that point.

Eric, aged eight, said, I want to become a magician. Then I can make my sister disappear. When our daughter Megan was asked this very question at school two weeks ago, she said this.

She said, I want to become like my mum. I thought that was pretty sweet. Yeah. And then a teacher said, that doesn't count. You have to choose something else. I'm not sure what she meant by that, the teacher.

But anyway, we won't go there. But many of us, when we were children, had our hearts set on becoming a certain kind of person, certain kind of people. And now that we are older, our dreams and aspirations, of course, are often projected onto our children or grandchildren.

And we want them to grow up and do well and become certain type of people. Well, God also wants us, as his children, to become a certain type of people.

[2 : 07] And it was the same thing he wanted for his people back in Zechariah's day. He wanted a people who were his very own, who were holy, as he is holy. In fact, his people had to be at one level because, as I've mentioned before, a holy God cannot mix with a sinful people.

People these days often say that opposites attract. But it's not so with a holy God and a sinful people. In that case, they repel. And so in the first two visions we'll look at today, God promises to remove sinners and sin from the land, from his kingdom.

For he's a holy God, and so he must have a holy kingdom. So let me show you from chapter 5. It's page 950. And where Zechariah sees a flying scroll, point 1, verse 1.

I looked again, and there before me was a flying scroll. He asked me, what do you see? I answered, I see a flying scroll, 20 cubits long and 10 cubits wide.

Zechariah's angel continues to act like his tour guide, if you remember, guiding him through and showing him different visions. And here he shows him a flying scroll. And do you notice how big it is?

[3 : 21] There's a footnote at the end of verse 2 to the bottom of your page, and it gives us the metric measurements, 9 metres long and about 4.5 metres wide.

It's huge. It's kind of the dimensions of this stage, if it was a big rectangle. Now, we're used to seeing things being advertised in the sky, you know, those banners that often pull behind aeroplanes.

But this is huge. It's massive. And its size suggests that it has something big and important to say. But it's also rather scary. Do you see verse 3?

And he said to me, this is the curse that is going out over the whole land. For according to what it says on one side, every thief will be banished.

And according to what it says on the other side, everyone who swears falsely will be banished. And the Lord Almighty declares, I will send it out, and it will enter the house of the thief, and the house of anyone who swears falsely by my name, and it will remain in that house and destroy it completely, both its timbers and stones.

[4 : 28] The angel says this scroll is a curse, which banishes both thieves and those who swear falsely, who lie. Now, it seems that this scroll represents God's law, because God's law announced both blessings for those who obeyed and curses for those who didn't obey.

What's more, the two crimes that are singled out here remind us of two commandments, do they not? You know, you shall not steal, and you shall not give false testimony.

Reminds you of the Ten Commandments, doesn't it? In fact, the scroll was written on both sides, wasn't it? Just like the stone tablets, both stone tablets were written on both sides. And so the scroll, I think, clearly represents God's law.

But why are these two particular crimes singled out? Well, I take it because that's what the people were doing, swearing falsely and stealing from each other. And I'll explain a bit more about how they might have been doing that later on.

But the scroll announces a curse. What is this curse? Well, it's the removal or banishment from the land, from God's kingdom. In fact, even the homes of thieves and liars will be destroyed right down to the timber and stones, it says.

[5 : 48] It's a pretty scary picture, isn't it? In other words, the curse is complete removal right down to the timbers and stones from God's kingdom. Why? Well, because God has returned to Jerusalem, as we saw in the earlier visions.

And so as God returns, sin must depart. They are opposites, you see. It's inappropriate for God's people to keep sinning, so it must be removed. We had some visitors recently who were from Sydney and got to experience a bit of the Melbourne winter.

And they found it very cold and complained about it and so on. They're all soft up in New South Wales, you know. I can say that because from there. But to be honest, I am looking forward to warmer weather.

And when summer does come, when the temperature does rise to a nice 25 degrees or whatever, then our thick winter coats will be inappropriate then, won't they?

They'll be no longer needed. They must be removed, otherwise we will swelter. And so too, as God's presence comes among his people, then sin is inappropriate.

[6 : 53] It must be removed. And we see this idea of removal continue in the next vision of the flying basket, point to verse 5. You see there in verse 5, then the angel who was speaking to me came forward and said to me, look up and see what is appearing, what literally, what is going out.

I asked, what is it? He replied, it's a basket going out. And he added, this is the iniquity of the people throughout the land. As I said, verse 5 literally says, look and see what is going out.

You see, just like the scroll went out over the land, kind of flew across it, it seems this basket goes out over the land in the same way. And he adds in verse 6 that the basket represents the sin or iniquity of the people.

And then the basket seems to come to Zechariah because the angel wants to show him what's in the basket. See verse 7? Then the cover of the lead, sorry, cover of lead was raised and there in the basket sat a woman.

He said, this is wickedness. And he pushed her back into the basket and pushed its lead cover down on it. Now it's all very odd, isn't it? In fact, one Bible scholar called this the strangest vision in the Bible because of these verses.

[8 : 13] Others say it's proof the Bible is anti-women. So what is going on here? Well, on the next slide, the Hebrew word for basket is the word ephah.

And the ephah was a measuring unit that the Jews used. One ephah equals 36.5 litres. So think of a small dirty clothes basket full of grain, if you like. But instead of grain, what does Zechariah see in the basket?

He sees a woman. Now is this normal? Of course not. I mean, she'd hardly fit in. I've got a bin here. This bin or basket is 50 litres.

So an ephah is 14 litres less, about here. Now can you imagine trying to stick an adult in this? I mean, I can try and get in. No, no, I'm not going to do that. But it's not normal, isn't it?

It's a misuse of the ephah to try and put someone in there. It was used for grain, not for people. And so the fact that there's a woman in there indicates that this ephah, this basket is being misused.

[9 : 20] So when the angel says this is wickedness, he's not saying that women are wicked. Rather, he's saying that the misuse of the basket is wicked. To put someone in there. You see, the basket represents the sin of the land, verse 6.

And in particular, the sin of misusing the ephah, verse 7 and 8. Now why do I think this? Well, because misusing the ephah was a sin that Israel had been prone to in the past, before the exile.

And so on the next slide in Micah, chapter 6, we read this. God speaking to Israel, he says, Am I still to forget, O wicked house, your treasures of wickedness?

And notice the short ephah, which is accursed. Shall I acquit a man with dishonest scales, with bag of false weights? Her rich men are violent, her people are liars, and their tongues speak falsely or deceitfully.

Therefore, I have begun to destroy you, Israel, to ruin you because of your sins. Now we'll just leave that slide up for a moment. Do you see what their wickedness was?

[10 : 23] It was cheating one another, using dishonest scales, a short ephah. You see, someone would come to the marketplace and they would ask for an ephah of grain. And the seller would swear that it was a whole ephah, but it was short.

He'd use dishonest scales or he'd use a slightly smaller basket. In other words, he would misuse the ephah. And by doing so, he would swear falsely to his neighbor and rip them off, steal from them.

And do you notice, swearing falsely and stealing were the very two crimes that the scroll singled out. You see, the Bible is not being anti-women. After all, in the very next verse, verse 9, it's women who are God's servants who carry the basket away.

What's more, the Bible calls God's people in Jerusalem daughter Jerusalem. And we Christians are called the bride. You know, that's the female, the bride of Christ. And so the Bible uses the female gender to describe both good and bad things.

And by doing so, it does what we do. We do the same thing. For example, we call sailing ships she, she sails well on the water kind of thing.

[11 : 34] That's what the Bible is doing here. Rather, the basket represents the people's sin in general. And the woman in the basket represents the sin of greed in particular, where they would misuse the ephah to steal from one another and swear falsely.

And God is saying that the sin of Israel before the exile is still in the land after exile. But since God has returned to Jerusalem, since the temple is being rebuilt, his presence has come, therefore all sin must depart, must be removed.

And this is what we see in verses 9 to 11. Then I looked up, and there before me were two women with the wind in their wings. They had wings like those of a stalk, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth.

Where are they taking the basket, I asked the angel who was speaking to me. He replied, to the country of Babylonia, to build a house for it. When the house is ready, the basket will be set in its place or on its pedestal.

You see, the basket is taken away from the land, away from God's kingdom. Do you notice where it ends up? It ends up in the land of Babylon. Babylon, this is the very place where the Tower of Babel was built.

[12 : 46] And the Tower of Babel was a symbol itself of opposition to God. And here in Babylon, there's another house or temple established. And the basket is set on its place, or literally on its stand or pedestal.

And so what's happening here is we've got two gods being set up. In Jerusalem is God in his temple. And then in Babylon is the basket in its temple, on its pedestal.

And they're opposing gods. Well, one's a true god and one's an idol. And so the people have a choice of whom they will worship. But only one leads to life in God's kingdom.

The other leads to life outside of God's kingdom, in Babylon. And what's more, God is warning them that greed is idolatry. You see, the people went into exile because they worshipped other gods, other idols, which were physical statues.

And when they came back, they made sure they didn't have any more statues. You know, the exile had cured them of that sin. But God is warning them here in this vision that idolatry is more than just worshipping a statue.

[13 : 56] It's also following wicked ways and being greedy. God's saying to participate in such wickedness like greed is, in fact, to worship another god who is opposed to the true god.

It's like what Jesus said in our other reading. You cannot serve both god and money. They are opposing gods. And not that money is bad. We mustn't hear that.

Rather, what is bad is the love of money, which is greed. Because if we love money more than God, if we chase after it more than God, if we serve it more than God, then it becomes our god.

I mean, we're serving it. We're chasing after it. And we end up worshipping it as an idol instead of the true god. Now, most of us wouldn't think that we worship money. But I remember being challenged in this area by a man called Archie.

We were talking about our tax returns. And in my mind, any tax I got back at tax time was like an early Christmas present. You know, yes, I'm going to spend this on myself.

[14 : 56] And what can I do? That kind of thing. But Archie made this passing comment. He said, oh, whatever we get back, we make sure we give 10% for God's work as well as, you know, with the rest of the money. I thought, oh, I'd never thought of that.

You see, Archie was a man who loved God more than money. And so he looked for ways he could give and share. And it made me wonder which I loved more.

A recent article I read suggested that the Christian community now gives less than 2% of its income as opposed to 10% in the Old Testament.

Of course, we're not in the Old Testament now. But the point of the article was that younger generations of Christians are giving less and less. Now, it could be because the cost of living has gone up.

Mortgages are more expensive. That's true. But perhaps our expectations of what we must have in life have also gone up. And the writer was asking himself, you know, what do I love more? Being comfortable, having everything I want or being generous for God's glory.

[15 : 59] What's more important? Now, although the issue of greed runs through these visions, it's only one example of sin. It's an example that the people were struggling with in Zechariah's day.

But the big point of these visions is that God is going to remove all sin from the land, from his kingdom, because it's inappropriate, incompatible with the kingdom of a holy God.

The only problem is, though, God's going to remove it through judgment. Do you remember the scroll, the curse? The curse that is going out that will judge and banish people from God's kingdom?

And they'll be taken away to the kingdom of Babylon. Just as God will judge the nations and bring rest in the final vision, which we won't have time to look at this morning, God will judge those in his own kingdom and remove all sinners and all sin.

And this is a problem for us because we are all sinners. We are all, therefore, under a curse. For we are all guilty of worshipping idols, of loving something more than God, whether it's money or our family or our job, whatever it is.

[17 : 11] And we are all guilty of swearing falsely, lying. We are all guilty of sin. And so we are all under this curse, banished from God's kingdom. Yet God loves us too much to leave it there.

And so he sends his son, Jesus, to take the curse of the law in our place. On the next slide, there's a verse from Galatians chapter 3. It says this, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.

How? Well, by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. What the verse is saying is, as Jesus hung on that wooden cross, he took the curse we deserve.

He suffered the judgment for our wickedness in our place. And if you believe in Jesus, then God redeems us from the kingdom of Babylon, so to speak, and brings us back into the kingdom of his son.

For us who believe, he removes the punishment of our sin from us. And treats us as holy and righteous in his sight. But if you don't believe, then you stay removed from God's kingdom.

[18 : 19] Out of God's kingdom. Out of heaven. That's what the Bible says. And so if you are here this morning, and you're not sure if you believe in Jesus, then come and talk to me. Because it's worthwhile being in God's kingdom.

And for us who do believe, who have had our punishment removed from us, then that's worth rejoicing about, is it not? In fact, King David wrote a psalm doing that. He didn't know how God would remove sin from us through Jesus.

But he did know that as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our, what? Sins, transgressions from us. And so he ends that psalm by saying, Praise the Lord, O my soul.

In other words, he rejoices and praises God for removing sin from him. And so too should we. But this doesn't mean that we never sin anymore, does it?

I mean, we still do sin, don't we? We still do things that are wrong. You see, while God has removed the punishment for our sin from us, he's not yet completely removed the presence of sin from us.

[19 : 25] That will happen on the last day when Jesus returns and makes all things new, including us. Can't wait for that day. Brand new kids, no sinful kids.

That would be fantastic. Actually, they're not that bad. But in the meantime, we are with God's help to work at removing sin from our own lives and becoming more like Jesus.

You see, this is what God wants for us to become when we grow up, so to speak. It doesn't really matter if we become lawyers, magicians, teachers, fitter and turners, whatever it is. What matters most is we become more and more like Jesus by removing sin from our lives and becoming holy until that last day when God makes us completely holy.

John puts it like this on the next slide. He says, How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are. Dear friends, we are God's children now.

We're in the kingdom now. And what we will be has not yet appeared. But we know that when he, Jesus, appears, we shall be like him, holy, pure, because we shall see him as he is.

[20 : 36] Everyone who has this hope, what do we do? Well, we purify ourselves as he is pure. You see, there is no place for sin in the kingdom of a holy God. And one day God will remove sin completely from our lives.

But we are to start working towards that now. Just like a person who works towards becoming an electrician starts studying electrical stuff and does their apprenticeship.

They start working towards what they will become. A doctor studies at med school and starts, you know, performing. Well, hopefully surgeries are not real people straight away. But, you know, they start working towards what they will become.

Well, so too we as Christians are to start working now towards what we will become on that last day. Pure, holy, like Jesus. I know a guy from a university who always wanted to grow up and become a PE teacher.

And so that's what he studied at university. But the PE crowd, there was a strong culture of drinking and getting drunk every weekend. And although this guy was a Christian, he found the peer pressure growing and growing to the point where he caved in and went out with them, got drunk and so on.

[21 : 45] After that weekend, do you know what he did? He changed courses. He went from doing what he wanted to do when he grew up to doing environmental science or something like that.

Something completely different. Something that he wasn't all that interested in. Now, why did he do that? Well, because growing up to become more like Jesus was more important than growing up to be a PE teacher.

That's why. Now, you can all rationalise in your mind. Well, why didn't you just change universities? Why didn't you do this? The point is, becoming more like Jesus was what was most important to him.

Is that what's most important for us? Is that what is most important for us as parents, for our children or for our grandchildren? For another person I know of, he was driving in the city and becoming angry with all the traffic.

And so he pulled over and let his wife drive. Big step for him. He doesn't like giving up the steering wheel. But you see, he was losing his anger. And it was more important that he'd remove anger and become more like Jesus.

[22 : 47] For a lady, as she stopped reading some of those magazines, those Better Homes and Gardens magazines, because she was finding that she was no longer content with what God had given her. She wanted more. And so she removed that from her life so that she would grow more like Jesus.

These people sought to remove sin and grow more like Jesus because that's what God wants for us. And because that's who we will become on that last day, pure as he is pure. And the great news is that we are not alone in this task.

God has given us his spirit to help us. And God continues to give us forgiveness time and time and time again. So if we mess up, that's okay.

Confess, say sorry. God will forgive you and keep growing more and more like Jesus. Let's pray for God's help in this. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have given your only son, Jesus, so that the punishment for sin, the curse, is removed from us, and that we can be part of your kingdom.

And Father, we thank you for giving us your spirit that works through our consciences and minds and tells us the right thing to do. Father, we pray that you would help us to do the right thing, to be more like Jesus, to remove the sin in our lives, whatever that may be, and to grow up into Christ, because that's what you want for us as your children.

[24 : 11] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.