WHAT GOD THINKS ABOUT SIN

Zechariah 5:1-11

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Zechariah Lesson 6

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President Calvin Coolidge was not known for his talkativeness. A story, perhaps apocryphal, says that one Sunday he attended a worship service without his wife. When he returned home, she asked him what the minister had talked about. “Sin,” replied silent Cal. “What did the preacher say about sin?” his wife persisted. Coolidge replied, “He was against it.”

Coolidge’s answer is a succinct summary of Zechariah 5, which tells us what God thinks about sin. In a nutshell, He is against it. Zechariah’s sixth and seventh night visions tell us,

God will be relentless in judging all sin.

A major mistake that God’s people can make is to think that if we are doing God’s work, it buys us some indulgences against our sins. Israel was rebuilding the temple, and Zechariah wanted to encourage them in that work. But God also wanted to warn them that His people must be holy, even as He is holy. Rebuilding the temple was a great work, but it didn’t earn them any credit in the sin department. Just because they were God’s chosen nation didn’t mean that God would tolerantly overlook their sin. God would deal with all sinners in Israel and He would ultimately purge the nation of all wickedness.

As God’s people in this age, we need to take heed to this central message of our text. Sometimes pastors start thinking that because they are so devoted to the Lord’s work, He will be tolerant of their sins. Or they think that as a “reward” for their many hours of hard service, they have earned a free pass to indulge in certain sins. So they fall into pornography, sexual immorality, or greed. Sometimes those who give large donations to a local church think that their gifts buy them influence or, even worse, a license to sin. But our text underscores the message of all Scripture, that we are to be holy as the Lord Himself is holy. God will judge all sin, including the sins of those who call themselves His people.
Satan often deceives us into thinking that sin will get us what we really want in life, and that holiness is boring or that it robs us of fun. But the Bible is consistently clear that unchecked sin is like leprosy, spreading gradually but inevitably to disfigure and finally kill its victims. It defiles all that come into contact with it. On the other hand, holiness brings true and lasting joy, and the family of a man who fears God will be blessed (Ps. 128).

Another deceptive tactic of the enemy is to get us to think that because God’s judgment is delayed, it will not happen at all. We look around and see people who flaunt their sin and yet seem to be prospering. We also see godly people who seem to suffer terribly. If we forget the clear teaching of the Bible, that God’s judgment against sin will be relentless and thorough, and that He is the unfailing rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6), we become vulnerable toward temptation and sin.

In one sense, the focus of Zechariah’s night visions shifts at this point. The first five visions gave hope and encouragement to God’s people as they worked on the temple rebuilding project. God’s word through His prophet was, “I have not forgotten My chosen people in spite of how it may seem. I will remember them and bless them at My appointed time.” But visions 6-8 deal with the theme of God’s judgment on sin, both the sins of the pagan nations (6:1-8), but also the sins of Israel. In one sense, the idea of God judging all sin doesn’t sound encouraging!

But as I said, if we see sin as the Bible sees it, and holiness as the Bible portrays it, then the idea of God purging all sin from our lives and from the face of the earth sounds wonderful. As 2 Peter 3:13 puts it, “But according to His promise we are looking for a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” That is a beautiful description of heaven, which will be a place where no sin can corrupt and spoil Paradise! With that as a backdrop, let’s look at Zechariah’s sixth vision:

1. **God will be relentless in judging the individual sins of His people: The flying scroll (5:1-4).**

   To understand both of these visions, we must keep in mind that their ultimate fulfillment awaits the future millennium, when Christ will rule the earth with a rod of iron and Satan will be bound
(Rev. 19:15; 20:1-3). Sin will not prevail then. Righteousness will reign on earth under Messiah’s reign.

But while the vision refers ultimately to that glorious future, it also applies to every generation. For us it means that God is relentless in purging our sins, to conform us to the image of Christ. As Paul instructed the Corinthians regarding the Lord’s Supper, they needed to judge their own sins so that they would not incur God’s judgment. He clarifies that he did not mean judgment in the sense of the final condemnation that awaits the ungodly, but rather, the discipline that God brings on His people when they do not deal with their own sins (1 Cor. 11:27-32; see also Heb. 12:1-13).

Zechariah looks up and sees a flying scroll that is open and flat. Its dimensions are 20 cubits by 10 cubits (30 x 15 feet). There is writing on both sides. One side proclaims that everyone who steals will be purged away. The other side proclaims that everyone who swears falsely by God’s name will be purged away. Further, the Lord declares that it will track down every violator, spending the night in their homes, consuming both the timbers and even the stones. This scroll has two lessons for us:

A. The standard for God’s judgment is His Word.

The scroll symbolizes God’s Word, especially His law as contained in the Ten Commandments. Just as God wrote the Ten Commandments on both sides of the stones (Exod. 32:15), so both sides of the flying scroll contain writing. The one side of the scroll mentions stealing, the middle commandment of the second table of the law, which deals with our relationships with one another.

The other side of the scroll mentions swearing falsely by God’s name, the middle commandment of the first table of the law, which deals with our relationship with God. As Jesus pointed out, the whole law can be summed up with, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...” and, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39). The size of the scroll and the fact that it was open for all to read showed that “its warnings were openly proclaimed to all, that none might have an excuse” (T. V. Moore, Zechariah [Banner of Truth], p. 79). The fact that the scroll was flying conveys the image of a giant raptor bird hovering in the sky, from which none can escape.
The dimensions of the scroll are identical with the size of the holy place in the tabernacle (according to many commentators, although I cannot substantiate it from the text they cite, Exod. 26:15-25); and the porch of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6:3), where the law was read to the people. Charles Feinberg concludes from these identical dimensions, “The vision would teach us that the holiness of the sanctuary of the Lord is the measure of sin and that judgment must begin at the house of God” (The Minor Prophets [Moody Press], p. 293). Since the scroll represents the Ten Commandments, it shows us that God’s judgment on sin is in line with His holiness as revealed in His Word.

Don’t get lost in the imagery and miss the application. The flying scroll tells each of us who name the name of the Lord that we must judge our lives by His holy Word. Our culture drifts morally with the times, but God’s Word is an absolute, unchanging moral standard. Apply it to your life!

Some years ago, Christianity Today [11/23/84, pp. 46-47] reported a poll in which Iowa residents were asked to rank 14 activities as either a “major sin,” “minor sin,” or “not a sin.” Most labeled extramarital sex and homosexuality as major sins. (I wonder if that would still be the case today!) Premarital sex ranked below lying and smoking marijuana. Going to pornographic movies, swearing, drinking hard liquor, skipping church on Sunday, and looking at Playboy magazine were all predominately ranked as “minor sins.” Most people viewed betting on a horse race, buying a lottery ticket, and shopping on Sunday as “not a sin.”

Without passing judgment on these items, I would simply point out that if we determine morality by popular opinion, we will drift downstream with our godless culture. I would urge my Christian sisters not to determine modest apparel (1 Tim. 2:9) by using some popular rock singer or movie star as your example! You should dress in a manner that does not tempt your brothers to lust. I would urge all of us not to fill our minds with the offensive language, sensuality, and violence that dominate television and the movies. Our views on such things as abortion and homosexuality should not be tainted by the moral relativity of our times. We must evaluate everything by God’s unchanging Word.
Take the two items that God focuses on in our text, swearing falsely by God’s name, and stealing. I hear many, even some believers, who use God’s name in vain. But we should highly revere the name of the Lord. While I hope that no Christian would be a thief or robber, we steal if we rob the government of the taxes that we owe or rob our employers by doing personal business on company time. So the flying scroll warns us to read God’s Word continually with a view to evaluating our lives by its holy standards. The flying scroll teaches a second lesson:

B. The extent of God’s judgment is relentless and thorough.

If we think that we can secretly disobey God’s Word and get away with it, we are deceiving ourselves. If we break God’s Word, it turns around and breaks us, and not only us, but our families as well. God promises to consume the house, including the timbers and stones, of those who call themselves by His name, but who do not judge their sin by His Word. Verse 4 shows us that sin is never private. It always damages our homes and our communities. The picture of verse 4 is of a town leveled by an intense fire, with the women and children shivering in the cold outside with no shelter.

Again, we must remember that this verse ultimately looks forward to the millennium, when the Lord will purge out sinners and establish His righteous reign. But there is still an obvious application for us, namely, that God is committed to the holiness of His people, beginning on the thought level (Matt. 5:27-30). Sometimes He takes drastic measures to impress on His people that He is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). Paul mentions that in Corinth some were sick and others were dying because they did not judge their own sins before coming to the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:29-31). We can fake it and put on our “holy face” when we hang around the church crowd, but God knows our every thought and deed. If we call ourselves by His holy name, we’ve got to do business with Him, beginning on the heart level. God is committed to our holiness, and so we must commit ourselves to growing in holiness in accordance with His Word.

2. God will be relentless in purging the sins of His people, while the world grows more wicked: The woman in the ephah (5:5-11).
The seventh vision is more difficult to interpret. Scholars differ on the meaning of the details, so we cannot be dogmatic on the particulars. But the overall vision conveys the idea of God purging the wickedness of His people, while the evil of the world continues unchecked. Dr. Feinberg notes the number of times that movement is indicated in this chapter and then observes, “Moral forces in the world do not remain stationary or stagnant; there is either progress or retrogression” (Minor Prophets, p. 295).

The interpreting angel tells Zechariah to look up and see what is going forth. Zechariah either cannot see the ephah clearly or he does not understand what it signifies, and so he asks, “What is it?” The angel answers, “This is the ephah going forth.” An ephah was the largest Hebrew dry measure, containing a little more than our bushel, or about 8-10 gallons. Then he adds, “This is their appearance in all the land” (5:6). A slight extension of a single Hebrew letter (yodh changed into vav) on the word translated “appearance” changes it to “iniquity,” a reading that one Hebrew manuscript and the Greek Septuagint version adopted (and the NIV). Either way, the idea seems to be that the ephah pictures the wicked of the land, filling up the measure of their sins. It may also be symbolic for trade or commerce (Merrill Unger, Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah’s Glory [Zondervan], p. 93), especially as practiced by the godless world system. The reference to the land (or earth, 5:6) is primarily to Israel, although some argue that it extends to the entire earth.

The ephah has a lead cover that is lifted up and Zechariah sees a woman sitting inside. Like the enlarged scroll, the ephah must have been larger than real life, because a woman could not fit in a bushel-sized basket. Here we get our only direct interpretive clue, when the angel says, “This is Wickedness!” In Hebrew, the feminine gender is used to represent abstract ideas (Feinberg, p. 295). Apparently the woman is struggling to get out of the ephah, sensing the judgment that is coming, but the angel forces her down into the ephah and puts the lead cover back in place.

Then two women with wings like a stork come out of the wind, pick up the ephah, and fly off. There is debate over whether these two winged women are agents of good or of evil (the stork is an unclean bird), but it is clear that, whatever their intent, they operate to accomplish the sovereign will of God. Zechariah asks the
angel where they are taking it and the angel answers, “To build a house for her in the land of Shinar; and when it is prepared, she will be set there on her own pedestal.”

What do these things mean? Again, we must be somewhat tentative. I think that it is likely that the woman is identical with the great whore of Revelation 17 & 18, with whom the nations, kings, and merchants of the world have committed immorality. Her sitting in the ephah probably portrays her “intimate contact with worldly wealth and commerce, by which she is supported and in which she delights” (Unger, p. 95). The fact that she is hidden in the basket may point to what Paul calls “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:7) that is at work in this evil world system. The lead cover shows that God presently restrains lawlessness from being as bad as it could be.

But the time is coming (culminating in the Great Tribulation) when the restraint will be lifted and wickedness will be enthroned in Babylon, which represents this present evil world system, opposed to God. Shinar is first mentioned in Genesis 10:10 with reference to Nimrod, whose kingdom was in Babel “in the land of Shinar.” It occurs again in Genesis 11:2 in reference to the events at Babel, when men vaunted themselves against God and He confused their languages. Shinar is the region where Babylon is located.

In Revelation 17 & 18, Babylon reaches the zenith of its evil power, wealth, and splendor. Men are prosperous and satisfied apart from God. Seemingly, they have succeeded in casting off the “oppressive” yoke of submission to God. Antichrist has brought peace, prosperity, and unity to the world such as it has never known. Man has seemingly triumphed over the many problems that have plagued the earth, and he has done it without God! Dr. Feinberg (p. 297) sums it up well, “God is stating that all wickedness is developing along well-defined lines and in due course it will be headed up in that place which has always stood for defiance against God.”

Zechariah doesn’t deliver the punch line until his final vision in chapter 6, which unfolds God’s judgment on this evil world and the crowning of Messiah. As Revelation 18 emphasizes, Babylon will fall in one day and in one hour (Rev. 18:8, 10, 17, 19). So the enthronement and triumph of wickedness in Shinar is only tempo-
rary and illusory. God is in control all along, and at the predetermined moment, Jesus will return in victory. Babylon the Great will fall, never to rise again.

There are two practical lessons for us to apply:

A. Although God is abundantly gracious, He has a full measure for judgment, both for nations and for individuals.

Make sure that you keep your measure of sin on empty! The ephah filled with the woman personifying wickedness pictures what other Scriptures teach, that God has a measure for sin. It is the largest measure, because His grace is abundant. But God patiently allows sin and sinners to multiply until His measure of judgment is full. Then He takes swift action in judgment, as pictured in the two women carrying the ephah with the woman off to Shinar.

We see this principle in Genesis 15:13-16, where God explains to Abraham about His covenant to make of Abraham a great nation. He says that Abraham’s descendants will be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years and then they shall return to Canaan. And then God adds, “For the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” (Gen. 15:16). That is a staggering statement! God lets His chosen people suffer in slavery in Egypt for 400 years while He shows mercy to the wicked Amorites (the people of Canaan). Also, God knew in advance when these godless people would fill up the measure of their sins. At that precise moment, God raised up Moses, delivered Israel, and told them to go into the land and slaughter the Canaanites. Their time of judgment had come!

We do not know when God’s time of judgment for America or other countries will come. Nor do we know how far we as individuals can go in sin before God’s judgment will fall on us. But the clear warning of Scripture is, don’t press the limit! Do not presume on God’s grace! Judge your own sin so that God doesn’t have to judge it for you!

B. When it seems that evil is winning, do not let it tempt you to sin.

Trust God who is sovereign even over evil and who will triumph mightily in the end. Both Zechariah and Revelation show that even though it appears that evil is unrestrained and that evil men go unjudged, it is not so. Judgment delayed does not mean that judgment has been cancelled!
God’s Word has given us a clear view of the end times, when wicked Babylon will seemingly be succeeding in defiance of God. Don’t be tempted to join her, because her success is only temporary. Jesus Christ will return in power and glory, Babylon will fall, and all evildoers will be judged. Christ will hit a come-from-behind grand-slam homerun in the bottom of the ninth! Even though you suffer for righteousness’ sake, persevere in walking in holiness before the Lord. When He comes, His reward will be with Him, “to render to every man according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12).

Conclusion

The late evangelist, Billy Sunday, said, “I’m against sin. I’ll kick it as long as I’ve got a foot, and I’ll fight it as long as I’ve got a fist. I’ll bite it as long as I’ve got a tooth. And when I’m toothless, I’ll gum it ’til I go home to Glory, and it goes home to perdition.”

That’s God’s view of sin. He’s relentlessly against it, and so we should be against it, beginning with our own sin. The Lord’s Supper is a reminder and an opportunity for us to judge sin in our own hearts, so that God does not judge it for us. Don’t view it as a perfunctory ritual. View it as a crucial time to examine your heart before our holy God, who will be relentless in judging all sin. As Paul wrote, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

Discussion Questions

1. How can we be hard on sin without becoming harsh, unkind, and judgmental? Where is the balance between mercy and judgment?

2. Is all discipline or judgment related directly to some sin in our lives? (See Hebrews 12:1-13.)

3. How can we determine which parts of the Bible are cultural and thus flexible, and which parts are absolute and unbending?

4. How do we find the biblical balance between living in the world, yet not becoming of the world (John 17:14-19)?

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