

THE COME BACK KIDS

ZECHARIAH 1:1-6 OCTOBER 30, 2022

Wedding invitations always stand out in the pile of mail. You check the return address to see who it's from then open up the envelope and read the particulars. It's unheard of to receive an invitation from a stranger - that is, unless you're a celebrity. Maybe a few of you invited a president or favorite movie star to your ceremony. Or maybe you were like the Schiros, who invited several hundred celebrities to their wedding in 1997. It started with a casual discussion about the guest list that started going "off the rails." The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel wrote up the story:

Mrs. Schiro said, "Martha Stewart would probably give a really good gift, so we're putting her on the list," Her fiancé responded: "Well, if you're inviting Martha Stewart, I'm going to invite Bob Uecker,"

From there the famous names piled up – actors, athletes, newscasters, politicians, royalty, fashion designers. In the less Internet-ready world of the 1990s, the Schiros went to the library and found a book of celebrity addresses.¹

A lot of the invitations came back undeliverable. Many were never answered. But 29 responses came in. Jack Nicklaus sent his congratulations and regrets, as he would be playing in the PGA championship that weekend. Princess Diana's representative wrote, "As I am sure you understand, it is not possible to accept this invitation. But nevertheless the princess hopes you have a very happy day." The Clintons, Gores, and Reagans sent letters, as did Donald Trump, Colin Powell, Leslie Nielsen, the whole cast of *Friends*, and even Martha Stewart.

But Harold Ramis of *Ghostbusters* fame took the cake with his hand-written reply:

"Mr. Harold Ramis and entourage will gladly attend," it says, then adding they would need 13 pork chops, 22 beef tenderloins and 12 chicken salads. *"We'll also need hotel rooms and limos to and from the airport and wedding. We'll take care of our own air travel. In case we don't show up, try to have a good time without us. We wish you love and luck and all good things. Best, Harold Ramis."*

The Old Testament book of Zechariah opens with an invitation. The Babylonian exile was over and God's people could once again return to their homeland. Many did. And to this group, the Lord sent a personal invitation. He said, "Come and be with Me, not as a formality, not as a joke, but on My terms, heart-to-heart." It was the same invitation He gave to their fathers and their fathers before them. It's the same invitation the Lord gives to every generation: "Come be with Me so I can be with you." The invitation is *always* open. The only question is, how will we respond?

Zechariah 1:1 - In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berechiah, son of Iddo:

¹ <https://archive.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/actor-kiddingly-tells-couple-to-expect-him--with-entourage--at-their-nuptials-b99214989z1-247619151.html/>

This is the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, when tens of thousands of Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and the temple. Zechariah was among them, along with the prophet Haggai, and they were helping in the work.² After laying of the foundation of the temple, the Jews were forced to stop building by the hostile unbelievers around them. It stayed that way for 18 years.³ Then the Lord started speaking through Haggai and Zechariah that the people should begin the work again.

It's always helpful to remind ourselves that the One True God makes a point to *speak* to us. He is a God Who reveals and explains and directs. We put a priority on the Word of God because we recognize how necessary and beneficial it is. Through the Scriptures we are made complete.⁴ But let's remember what a big deal it is that we serve a God Who speaks!

Whenever there's a power outage at your home, whether planned or not, don't you just want to know what's going on and what to expect and when the lights might come back on? The power companies are getting better at this - they usually have a website where you can check status and receive updates. But imagine having *them* call *you* and saying, "Here's what's going on, it's just going to be 30 more minutes." That would be great!

The Lord speaks to us not just about the problems we face, but so much more. He says, "Here's what's going on in your heart. Here's why things are the way they are. Here's what you should expect from the future and principles for how to live in such a way that your life is full of My peace, and My joy and My glory. Here's how to understand the past and the present and the future. Here's what's going on in Heaven, and here's how you can know Me on a deep and life-changing level."

And, as demonstrated in this opening verse, it is always *the Lord* Who takes the initiative. He is the One reaching out, in *this* case, to a group of people who had - in many ways - given up.

Zechariah 1:2 - ²"The Lord was extremely angry with your ancestors.

God starts His message to them by explaining His *furious* displeasure with their forefathers. Literally, the words say He was "angry with anger."⁵

We most often think and speak about the *love* of God, because it is by His love we are saved. His love is our only hope. But the fact that God is love does not mean He has no other emotions. Yes, He is abounding in faithful love, but He is also perfectly true and perfectly holy. *We* are anything but holy. All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And God *hates* sin because sin defiles and ruins His creation. Sin is always, at its core, a rebellion against the truth of God and His rule over our lives. Sin is treason that puts barriers between us and the God Who loves us. Big sins, small sins, all of them cause us to turn away from God and toward death. But we belong to God. And so, He hates sin. In His eyes, we are the most valuable treasure of all. When we sin, which we

² Ezra 5:1-2

³ Hershey H. Friedman, Paul J. Herskovitz *Rebuilding of the Temple and Renewal of Hope*

⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁵ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

all do, it provokes His righteous anger. Now, the Lord is *slow* to anger, but that should not cause us to be casual about sin.

What had these ancestors done to make the Lord so angry? You can find the sad saga throughout the Old Testament. There are passages that give a general rundown like 2 Kings 17 and Ezekiel 32. They broke every single one of the 10 commandments, and much more besides.⁶ They worshiped idols and blasphemed God. They defiled the Lord's house and committed gross acts of sexual immorality. They ignored the dietary laws and refused to celebrate the Passover. They set up evil kings and corrupt priests. They burned their children alive on the altars of Molech and filled the land with violence. They coveted, lied, and oppressed the weak. In one assessment, God said:

Jeremiah 7:28 - This is the nation that would not listen to the Lord their God and would not accept discipline. Truth has perished—it has disappeared from their mouths.

Reading the books of the Old Testament, it's clear why the Lord was angry. We get angry when we hear stories of the career criminal who keeps being let out and getting away with things who then goes on to commit murder or some other heinous crime. We think, "*That person needs to be stopped!*" For hundreds of years the Lord tried to call Israel back into relationship with Himself, but they would not listen. Instead they went deeper into sin and killed the messengers God sent them.

And so, finally, judgment came. Now, the descendants of those previous generations were back in Jerusalem. And God still loved them and had plans for them. He still had a desire to revolutionize their lives and set them aside for His own special purposes.

Zechariah 1:3 - ³So tell the people, 'This is what the Lord of Armies says: Return to me—this is the declaration of the Lord of Armies—and I will return to you, says the Lord of Armies.

This word for return is also used for repentance. That's a religious word that we don't use in regular life very much, but the Bible uses it a whole lot. In fact, this is the 12th most frequently used verb in the entire Old Testament - used over a thousand times.⁷ It means simply to turn toward the Lord. In other passages, we are given these shades of meaning: Incline your heart to the Lord, wash the evil from your heart, break up your unplowed ground and seek the Lord.⁸

Zechariah probably delivered this message to an assembly of people, not unlike us here today.⁹ If I was there, I probably would've thought, "Now wait just a minute. I *have* returned from exile. I'm *in* Jerusalem. I *helped* build the wall and pour the foundation the the temple. I'm doing the thing!" But God, Who knows all things and knows every heart, gathered these people together and said, "There's still a barrier between us." In Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai that while their bodies were in Jerusalem, there were a lot of heart issues that needed to be worked out. Some of these

⁶ https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_exile.html

⁷ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁸ Joshua 24:23, Jeremiah 4:14, Hosea 10:12

⁹ Arno C. Gaebelein *Studies In Zechariah*

individuals were falling into the same pattern of disobedience that the ancestors before them had. Some had married outside of what the Law allowed. Some were ignoring the regulations of God's law. Some were cozying up to ungodly, non-believing rulers. Some had become totally materialistic, caring only about their own interests and not supporting the work of the ministry. Some were giving into fear instead of trusting God. They were in a good *spot*, but many were not in the right *spirit*. For the Lord, it wasn't just about location, it was about relation.

And so, in tender kindness, the Lord said, "You've returned to the land, but you haven't returned to Me." It's not unlike Jesus' message to the church in Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2. "I know your works, your labor, and your endurance. But you have abandoned the love you had at first."

God wanted their *hearts* much more than He wanted a stone temple or a walled city. He wants *you*. He wants your heart to be united with His. In Isaiah He says, "You will be *delivered* by returning and resting," but we must be *willing* to come.

You see, repentance, turning to God, isn't just something we do a single time. We're invited to constantly turn our hearts toward the Lord.

Joel 2:12 - Even now—this is the Lord's declaration—turn to me with all your heart,

When we choose to turn our hearts toward God, He is able to rush in and embrace us with His love and power. It's pictured beautifully in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Once the son realizes he has gone astray and turns back, we see the father *running* to wrap him up in love and forgiveness and bring him home.

Walter Kaiser writes,

"Is this preaching needed any less today than in Zechariah's day or in the day of the New Testament apostles? No! People today are not more heavenly inclined. Is this preaching needed by Christians as well? Yes! It is always time to repent of our sins if we wish to experience the power of the gospel and the joy of walking with our Lord."¹⁰

Zechariah 1:4 - ⁴Do not be like your ancestors; the earlier prophets proclaimed to them: This is what the Lord of Armies says: Turn from your evil ways and your evil deeds. But they did not listen or pay attention to me—this is the Lord's declaration.

There was nothing new about the message. God's invitation is always the same. But the *choice* for us is always a present, new thing. The book of Hebrews puts it this way: "Today, if you hear His voice, don't harden your hearts."¹¹ We're invited to listen to the living word of God that has been delivered to us, that we might know the mind of God and His desires for our lives.

¹⁰ Walter Kaiser Jr. *The Preacher's Commentary - vol. 23: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*

¹¹ Hebrews 3:15

The Lord says that their ancestors did not listen or pay attention. They were focused on, distracted by, other things - things that *didn't* ultimately matter.

It is so easy for us to become consumed with things that don't matter. They soak up our attention and our affections, leaving little time for what is eternal. God said, "Don't be like those ancestors." He pointed to spiritual history that we can study and observe so that we might learn from it.

Henry Ford once said,

"What do I care about Napoleon? What do we care about what they did 500 or 1,000 years ago? I don't know whether Napoleon did or did not try to get across and I don't care. It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. We want to live in the present and the only history that [matters] is the history we make today."¹²

A few years later, he founded a historical museum, celebrating his own work.¹³

God invites us to think outside ourselves and outside our present circumstances. He explains the human heart, reveals the future, points out the past, gives us examples, all so we can choose to turn our hearts and lives toward Him so we can live together in harmony.

When we talk about repentance, we most often think about the *things* God commands us not to do. Behaviors, actions, attitudes. And the Lord does highlight "your evil ways and evil deeds," but repentance is more about a *Person* than it is about things. We should focus more on what we're turning *toward* than what we're turning *from*.

As for those evil things that tear down God's good and spiritual work in our lives, when we turn our hearts and our minds toward Him, then *He* washes us and repairs us and aligns our desires with His. *He* is the One Who accomplishes the transformation. Look at the story of these post-exile Jews. God did the impossible for them. He brought them back to the Land of Promise. He acted providentially so that they wouldn't have to pay for the materials to rebuild the city or the temple or the wall. He turned the hearts of Darius and Xerxes. He frustrated the plans of their enemies. He raised up servants and paved the way so that these people could be *redeemed*. That's what God does again and again and again for the human race.

Zechariah 1:5-6a - ⁵Where are your ancestors now? And do the prophets live forever? ⁶But didn't my words and my statutes that I commanded my servants the prophets overtake your ancestors?' "

For hundreds of years, people wasted God's mercy, they dismissed His grace, and mocked the prophets. But, in the end, the Word overtook them. His Word always comes to pass.

¹² <https://www.thoughtco.com/henry-ford-why-history-is-bunk-172412>

¹³ <https://www.motorcities.org/story-of-the-week/2019/a-brief-history-of-the-henry-ford-museum>

God's Word is *still* alive and powerful, His promises are *still* in effect. He has warned that another judgment is coming - one that will overtake the entire world. Many may mock, many may refuse to accept God's mercy. His Word will overtake them. The heavens were made by the word of the Lord, and when He returns, by His word the nations will be judged and destroyed.

Do the prophets live forever? This rhetorical question challenged the listeners and us today with the fact that life is short. Our choice to turn toward God must be made now. We must not put it off or take it lightly, but decide to follow Jesus. What would Zechariah's people do?

Zechariah 1:6b - So the people repented and said, "As the Lord of Armies decided to deal with us for our ways and our deeds, so he has dealt with us."

The people did not protest, they didn't complain, they didn't challenge what God said. They agreed and accepted His invitation. They listened to what He said, hard though it was, and the result was a wonderful spiritual success story. All of their problems weren't instantly, magically gone but their hearts were in the right position. The power was back on - relationship was restored.

But notice how simple the Lord's invitation was: Just come to Me. Turn around and embrace Me, My arms are open wide.

Newsweek published an article last week about some wedding guests who were incensed and offended when the invitation demanded they pay \$112 each for their food at the reception *on top* of bringing money for the honeymoon.¹⁴

You know, when the Lord invites us to be with Him, He has requirements. He has boundaries and guidelines and commands that we *must* follow if we want to be in relationship with Him. We come on His terms. But, the Bible explains that everything He requires He *enables* us to do. *He* pays the price. *He* washes the stains. *He* provides the robe of righteousness. What He asks of us is to come. To turn to Him. It's not something we do once, it's something we keep doing as we walk with Him. Gordon Smith writes, "*True conversion leads us to be always conscious of sin and our need to turn from it. Repentance...remains a continuing and vital element of the spiritual life. For without its abiding presence, there is no transformation.*"¹⁵

If you're wondering how this works *practically*, well, God's Word gives us a few helpful instructions. Repentance is a matter of the heart, but we see it demonstrated first through confession to God for our sin. Examples are found in Leviticus 26 and in the examples of Nehemiah and Daniel. Those men went to prayer to agree with God, admit their sin and the sin of their nation. Then they spent time reading the Word of God and worshiping Him, and finally inviting the Lord to be present and to do all He wants to do in their midst.¹⁶ Paul puts it much more succinctly and personally in Philippians 2 when he says, "Work out own salvation with fear and trembling."

¹⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/fury-wedding-couple-charge-guests-110-each-wow-1752758>

¹⁵ Gordon Smith *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion And Authentic Transformation*

¹⁶ Nehemiah 9, Daniel 9

Any wedding invitation you receive will bear these letters: RSVP - respond, *please*. God invites us to be united with Him. He pleads with us to respond - to choose to return to Him, that we "might experience the fullness of God's blessing" in our lives.¹⁷

We have the invitation. Now the Lord waits for our hearts to respond.

¹⁷ Al Fuhr, Gary Yates *The Message Of The Twelve: Hearing The Voice Of The Minor Prophets*