

A Wall of Fire

Zechariah 2

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'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as a village without walls because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around,' declares the Lord, 'and I will be the glory in her midst. Up, up, flee from the land of the north,' declares the Lord, 'for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heavens,' declares the Lord. 'Up, escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon. For thus said the Lord of hosts, after His glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who served them. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst,' declares the Lord. 'And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day and shall be my people, and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for He has roused Himself from His holy dwelling.' Amen.

Zechariah, if you haven't heard of him or read much about him before, he was a prophet to the nation of Israel. The time in which he was prophesying to the nation of Israel was during the return from exile. The people of Israel had been taken out of the land of Israel, where they came after the exodus, after they were brought out of Egypt; they came into the land of Israel, but they were disobedient there and were taken out of that land by God and sent away to Babylon. It's called the exile. And this was a total disaster. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had removed God's people from this land of promise, this land of blessing. Worse than that, he had destroyed everything, including the temple of God, which is absolutely devastating to God's people. The temple of God in Jerusalem was a glorious thing. Solomon built it, and it was a place where God's glory came and settled and dwelt. It was a symbol of God's presence with His people. And so, when the Jews were living in Israel, they lived in a place where they knew God lived. They lived with God in this land. But when they were taken out of the land, when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, all of that was lost.

By the time that Zechariah came, they had been out of the land, with the temple destroyed, for 70 years. And they had just started to return to the land under the rule of Cyrus and Darius, kings of Persia. And this was really exciting. They had begun to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple. But after meeting some resistance from some of the local tribes who'd moved back in during their 70 years of absence, they had stopped work. Now these Israelites who had returned to the land of Israel and started to rebuild and now stopped working were raised on the same stories that we should know if we've read our Old Testament. They probably knew them even better than we do. These were their national history. They knew all the stories of Genesis. They knew about the great salvation that God brought to their people out of Egypt through the Exodus. They were deeply familiar with the idea that they were a special people, chosen by God, a people whom God would live with. They were connected to the lines of kings Saul, David, and Solomon. They remembered these times when Israel prospered under godly kings. They knew about the glory of God and how it had descended upon the temple in Jerusalem when Solomon had finished building it.

They lived, longing, waiting for another king to come, another temple to be built where God would once again live with His people, and they would prosper and do well and live in a time of peace when their enemies would be destroyed. This was all part of their hope as they came back from Babylon to the ruined city and began to rebuild. But as I mentioned, they'd stopped work by the time Zechariah comes. The temple stood only partially completed, like some half-done renovation in a house. Have you ever been to someone's house where their house is always perpetually being renovated? It's like walls broken down all the time. It never looks completed. That's what it was like. And it was there in the middle of Jerusalem, staring at them daily, this half-done building where God was meant to come and live. And it was into this situation that Zechariah was sent, along with the prophet Haggai. So you can read those two books side by side. This was just before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Just to situate yourself in all of this.

So Zechariah and Haggai come and begin to prophesy and to encourage the Israelites to get back to work. This is the context of the vision that we read this morning, a vision of a glorious Jerusalem. And so I want to work through this vision briefly with you before considering more deeply what God is communicating to His people in this passage.

So we've entered Zechariah's prophecy in chapter 2. And it was one vision that we saw in that chapter. Zechariah actually has eight separate visions. And when you see these visions, you have to think of them as pictures. They're pictures that are being painted for God's people. Our vision

that we're looking at today opens up with a man with a measuring line. We see that in verses 1 and 2: "I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand. And I said, 'Where are you going?' And he said, 'I am going to measure Jerusalem.'"

Now this should make us think, and would have made the Jews of the day think, about Ezekiel. Because Ezekiel has a man with a measuring line as well, in chapters 40 to 48. Except in Ezekiel, we're told a little bit more about this man. He's a man whose appearance was like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand. And he goes out not to measure Jerusalem, but to measure the temple, the temple of God. And I think this man is probably the same man, God's measuring man, if you like. And his appearance in Ezekiel's prophecy perhaps gives us some idea as to maybe who this man is. A man with bronze and linen and a measuring line. Those of us who've read the rest of the Bible, into Revelation, perhaps might have some bells ringing at this point. Think of a man with bronze and linen. Sounds like Jesus in the early chapters of Revelation.

And when we get to the last chapters of Revelation, we see that this Jesus has a measuring line as well, in chapter 20. But this man is sent out with a slightly different tool to the one in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, he has a measuring line, kind of like a tape measure, something you use to measure buildings. In Zechariah's prophecy, he has a measuring line, which is a different word, and it's a word that we might use to describe something you'd measure paddocks with. It's a large-scale measuring device. And so a question that may have been in Zechariah's mind, in the mind of his hearers, is why is this man holding such a large tool to measure Jerusalem? And the answer that comes in Zechariah's prophecy is that Jerusalem will be so big that you're going to need a paddock measuring device to measure it. And so you can see Jerusalem stretching out. He tells the angel to say to Zechariah in verse 4 there, "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls because of the multitude of people and livestock in it." Can you see it stretching out there? This gigantic city sprawling across the land, measured in acres, in hectares, with people and livestock everywhere.

And once again, a question might come to our mind as we're forming this picture of this city in our heads: how on earth are you going to protect this place? If it's so big, how are you going to build a wall around it? And once again, the angel addresses this question in verse 5, where God says, "I will be to her a wall of fire all around, and I will be the glory in her midst." And it's this picture that we're getting painted here, a picture of a sprawling city filled with inhabitants, with a fiery wall around it, and the glory of God in its midst.

I want to just let this picture sit in our minds and consider what it is that

Zechariah is actually painting for us. Because these images that we're getting here, we've seen them before. We've seen them before in the Bible. Just think about a wall of fire, for instance. The first time we see a wall of fire in the Scriptures is in Genesis chapter 3. The story of Genesis is that God placed man in a garden, and He lived with man there. Sounds a lot like the temple, doesn't it? But when man sinned, he got kicked out of the garden. And Genesis chapter 3 verse 24 tells us that God drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden, He placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. When man was kicked out of the garden, the garden became a place that was walled by fire, by a fiery sword wielded by cherubim. It turned every way. You could not get in. Its design is to keep man out of the garden, to keep him away from the presence of the Lord because in the Lord's presence is the tree of life. And man is sinful and must not live forever. This fiery wall is designed to keep sinners out. It's a fire that protects God's presence from the presence of sin. It's a fire of purity, maintaining the cleanness of God's garden temple.

We see another flaming wall as we keep reading the scriptures, in Exodus chapter 14. You might know this story as well. God's people are trapped in Egypt, and God sends Moses to deliver them, and there's all the plagues, and then the Israelites run out of Egypt on the night of the Passover. But then something terrible happens. They're fleeing across the desert, and God leads them into a trap. And they have the sea, the Red Sea, in front of them, and coming up behind them is Pharaoh's army, who's decided to pursue them. And in Exodus 14, we read that this remarkable thing happens: "The angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them. And the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness, and it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night." That's in verses 19 and 20. And if you look at verse 24 in Exodus 14, you see that this pillar of the Lord that moves from before Israel to behind it, to between them and the Egyptian army, it's a pillar of fire, smoky fire. And so it's giving light to the Israelites and it's bringing darkness and confusion to the Egyptians.

And now this is really interesting because here we have a wall of fire, but what side are God's people on? They're on the right side of it. God's enemies are on the side that God's keeping them out. You know, they're being protected. God's people are being protected from God's enemies by this wall of fire. And this wall of fire keeps leading Israel through the wilderness, and when Israel finally builds the tabernacle for God, this wall of fire comes and rests on top of the tabernacle. And it actually becomes a part of the tabernacle complex, and eventually the temple complex.

And it's kind of hopeful, but not hopeful when this happens. So God's glory, it seems, in Exodus 14, is living with God's people inside, right? God's people are on the inside of the fire. But when the temple is built and the tabernacle is built, we find that it's not quite the case. The design of the Israelite camp was actually that they all lived outside the tabernacle, and the tabernacle was in the middle of them, and not everyone could go in. And the thing that stopped people from going in, the thing that stood in the way, was the altar, where fire and smoke would be burning continually. And so if you were an Israelite and you were living in the Israelite camp, you would know that God's living with you, but He's over there in the tabernacle, and you can't get in because you can't go past the altar. That's where you could go to; you could go to the altar and you could meet with God there, but only priests could go past the altar into the tabernacle itself, where God's presence was.

And interestingly, to do that, the priests had to go through the wall of fire; they had to go through sacrifice. They would sacrifice and burn the sacrifice on that altar before going into the presence of God Himself. But for an Israelite, even though it looked like God was living with His people, they still found themselves on the wrong side of the wall of fire. And we see this fire doing its work of protecting the holiness of God in the story of Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron's sons. They thought they could bring their own fire into the tabernacle, essentially they thought they could approach God through their own fire. But only God's fire was sufficient to cleanse God's people, and so what happens to Nadab and Abihu is that fire flashes out from the temple and consumes them, destroys them, protecting God's holiness from sinful man who thinks that he can approach God with his own fire.

And all of this to paint this picture for you: when Zechariah starts talking about a large city of Jerusalem with an unmeasurable circumference and a wall of fire around it, we must realize that what Zechariah is seeing, that the picture of Jerusalem that he's painting, is not just Jerusalem the way it was. Because we know that God's presence lives on the inside of fiery walls. And so what Zechariah is actually painting a picture of is the temple of God expanding to be the entirety of Jerusalem. The temple of God, which seems to be entirely absent from this picture—you can't see it, Zechariah never mentions it in chapter 2—has actually expanded to fill all of Jerusalem. And this wall of fire that was marked by the cherubim, keeping people out of Eden, that was marked by the glory of God that protected God's people in Exodus 14, that was marked by the altar, this fiery wall that stopped people from going into the full presence of God, that whole design has now expanded to be the entirety of God's city. And all of a sudden, we see now that God's people are on the right side of the fire at last. They're inside the temple, and the fire is outside of them.

Now, when you're outside a fire, when there's something you want on one side and there's a fire here, the fire is a threat, the fire is a difficulty, the fire is something that stops you. But when you're on the other side of the fire, it's a protection. It's a refuge, it's a warm and comforting defense that keeps you safe. Zechariah is painting a picture of God's people returning to Eden, God's people coming and living inside the temple itself, or more accurately, the temple expanding to fill God's city where God's people dwelt.

Now, the people hearing this message in Zechariah's day must have been amazed. How could God do this thing? How could this actually play out in their history when they're struggling to even complete the walls of Jerusalem and finish building the temple itself, let alone seeing that city expand so big that you can't wall it? And actually, in the history of Israel, this prophecy never came true in the way that people might have hoped it would. God's glory never returned to the temple of God. The city of Jerusalem never expanded to be this size, the actual literal city of Jerusalem never expanded to be this size. But as we keep reading the biblical narrative, we find references to fire and glory that help us to understand how this prophecy was fulfilled.

We see, for instance, John the Apostle record that when Jesus came, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." And so when Zechariah speaks about God's glory living in the presence of His holy city, well, we see that Jesus Himself was the glory of God who came and lived amongst His people. We saw a reference like this in Matthew chapter 3 that we read, when John the Baptist is telling us about what Jesus has come to do; he says, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." That's interesting. And we're going to see this builds; this picture builds. Jesus then is the glory of God dwelling among His people. But the reference to the baptism of the Spirit and fire shows us that there is a greater fulfillment of this prophecy than the incarnation. This is amazing. We often think, hey, I'd love to be around when Jesus was around. Wouldn't you? It would be much better if Jesus was up here preaching to you than me. But the way the biblical story plays out is the incarnation is actually not the high point of God's dwelling with His people. Even though when Jesus was here on earth, the glory of the Father was revealed through Him, it actually gets better.

And we see this when we keep reading and find out what this baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire looks like when it's sent by Jesus in the book of Acts. Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 6 says this: "When the day of Pentecost

arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered because each one was hearing them speak in his own language." And I want to argue that what you see happening here in Acts is a wall of fire being built, a wall of fire being built around God's people in the work of the Holy Spirit. And we see this first in terms of access. Walls do two things, right? Walls are a defensive mechanism; they keep people out. But walls are also the way to get in. You have to go through the walls to get into a city. And at Pentecost, we find that the fire which we would normally see in the altar in front of the temple is now resting upon each one of God's people. And this fire is causing them to do something. What are they doing? They're preaching the gospel to all nations. That's what we see play out as we go through the whole rest of the book of Acts.

And so the fire of God has become something that is present on each one of God's people. Each one of God's people becomes part of the wall of fire, as it were. And the preaching of the gospel goes out. And what is the declared word that goes out? "Come into the city." That's the gospel. The gospel is Jesus Christ has died, He's risen again, and He's ascended on high. And all those who wish to come in to God's city, repent and believe the gospel, and you will be saved. Come in. It's actually a welcoming message. And as God's people go out into the four corners of the world, preaching the gospel throughout the book of Acts, we see that the city of God expands just as Zechariah said it would. And we start to see multitudes of people actually from all nations coming in. Look at verse 11 of Zechariah chapter 2: "Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day." This is that day. As the gospel, which is the fiery work of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed to the nations goes out, God's city expands as many nations come in. But notice that they must all come through the fire. Remember, the fire protects God's holiness and keeps sinners out. That's what we've seen throughout a short survey of the Scriptures. And it still does the same thing, even as it's been transformed into the gospel message. How does it do it? Through the purification of sacrifice. That's what allowed the priests into the temple. That's the picture that we're receiving as we read the Scriptures and how that portrays a wall of fire protecting God's presence and protecting God's holiness. You must come through the fire of sacrifice. And that is precisely what the gospel says. You must come to God through the purifying work of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He is the altar that protects the holiness of God and keeps sinners out. You cannot come in as a sinner. You can only come in as a sinner cleansed, as a sinner forgiven, as someone transformed

into a saint. And when you believe the gospel, you are walking through the wall of fire. Your sin is burnt up as you trust in Christ, and you walk into the presence of God totally clean.

Now, as we keep reading the book of Acts, we find that this wall of fire is not just an access point; it's also a protection for God's people. In Acts chapter 4, the new Christians were facing threats of persecution from the chief priests and elders and were feeling fearful. And so they go to God in prayer and ask for boldness, for courage to keep pressing on in the face of their enemies. And Luke records for us in Acts chapter 4 verse 31: "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." You see what's happening there? They're facing the threats of enemies. They're saying, "Lord, I'm scared. I don't know; I have no defense." They're not in a physical city; they've got no physical defense system. And so they go to God and they say, "God, we need you to protect us." And He does. And how does He do it? He sends the Holy Spirit into them, which gives them boldness to keep on preaching. This is the protection that God gives His people: boldness to keep going, courage to keep going, peace in the presence of enemies.

This is the protection that Stephen receives as he's being stoned by God's enemies. Once again, we see what happens when Stephen prays and says, "Lord, protect me." He's not physically protected from the stones; he's given something far more powerful: a sight of the Lord Jesus ascended on high, the heart to pray for his enemies as the blood pours down his head. And as he passes into the next life, that is the protection God gives. That is the wall of fire that is impenetrable. There are many accounts throughout church history of martyrs finding the exact same thing. They find the flames of their death to be a place of peace and joy, even though it's causing them physical pain. Though interestingly, some don't seem to have even felt the pain at all. Fox's Book of Martyrs records the death of Johannes Huss: "The flames were now applied to the faggots of wood, when our martyr sung a hymn with so loud and cheerful a voice that he was heard through all the cracklings of the combustibles and the noise of the multitude. At length, his voice was interrupted by the severity of the flames, and soon closed his existence." Singing so loud and cheerful a voice in the fire. His friend Jerome of Prague died in a similar manner: "In going to the place of execution, he sung several hymns, and when he came to the spot, which was the same where Huss had been burnt, he knelt down and prayed fervently. He embraced the stake with great cheerfulness, and when they went behind him to set fire to the faggots of wood, he said, 'Come here and kindle it before my eyes, for if I had been afraid of it, I would not have come to this place.' The fire being kindled, he sung a hymn, but was soon interrupted by the flames, and the last words he was heard to say were these: 'This

soul in flames I offer.' John Rogers was burnt at the stake in 1555 during the reign of Queen Mary. He is said to have washed his hands in the flames as if they were cold water."

Here is the point: In this life, we face trials, and they come in all sorts of different presentations, right? Sometimes it's persecutions like we're reading of. Sometimes it's difficulties in our life. Sometimes it's just an affliction from repeated temptation. Maybe it's depression or maybe it's anxiety. Maybe you just keep falling in this one area, and you just can't seem to—it feels like the temptation is so strong. Maybe it's financial difficulties. There's all sorts of different ways that we are afflicted. Maybe it's a boss or a work colleague who just doesn't leave us alone. Peter tells us we will encounter fiery trials, and it's interesting that he uses that word, to me. These are the fires, but what we're seeing in Zechariah's prophecy is that is precisely where God meets His people. And the way in which God provides for His people in the midst of fiery trials, whatever they may be, is by the power of His Spirit. He displays His presence to them in the midst of the trial. Very, very often in our life, God's design is not to take us out of the fire; it's to meet us in the fire. And I think Zechariah is pointing us to that fact. And when He does meet us by the power of His Spirit, we find that we are in the New Jerusalem. We find that the fire actually becomes a protection to us and a way that God defends us from our enemies.

A really practical way that appears, I think, is when we're afflicted, say, with temptation. One of the things that a Christian finds as the Holy Spirit ministers to him in the middle of repeated temptation in an area of their life is that they hate that sin with vehemence. That's a protection. They see their weakness and their inability to overcome sin in their life by their own power, and so they fall on their knees all the more before their Lord. That's a protection. When we're comfortable, when we think we're strong, then we're weak. Then we're easily toppled. When God brings us low by the fires of trials, then we're strong. Why? Because Paul says this very thing. He says, "I've been afflicted by a thorn in the flesh, and I prayed to God, 'Release me from it, please.' And God says, 'No, in your weakness, you are strong.' In your dependence upon me, then you are strong." It's when you see the trials of life and you're brought to say, "Lord, I know that by your Spirit, you will be a fiery wall around me," that's when a Christian is his strongest.

And interestingly, Peter connects the ideas that we're seeing play out in Zechariah in 1 Peter chapter 4. He says, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed." And listen to this: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you

are blessed. Why? Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." Can you hear Zechariah 2 coming through there? When you are in the middle of the fiery walls, you count yourself as blessed because the Spirit of glory rests upon you.

In this life, the fire of Christ's sacrifice gives us access to God, but we live for a time still inside the fire. I actually think Zechariah 2 is pointing to this age of the world. I don't think he's pointing us to the new creation. And I'll tell you why. Because when we get to the end of the Bible, the new creation is described for us in Revelation 19-21. And you can go and read it, and you'll see some similarities to Zechariah 2. You'll see the glory of God living in their midst. You'll see people from all nations have flooded in. But there's one thing missing: fire. You won't find it. Why? Well, one answer is that there is no need for a wall of fire anymore. The fire of God only appeared after Adam and Eve sinned. The fire of God protects the holiness of God and the holiness of His dwelling place. The fire of God provides access and cleansing for God's people. The fire of God through trials brings us close to God's presence and has a purifying effect. But when we get to the new creation, all God's people are purified. All sin has been removed. And all of God's enemies, all of the people who God's people must be protected from, have been thrown into the lake of fire. That's where the fire has gone. They cannot attack God's kingdom anymore. It's almost as if the city has expanded so much that the wall of fire has become a lake, if you can sort of wrap your head around that geographically.

This new creation is something that we get a taste of in this life, as we meet with God's people, as we have those times of special fellowship with God in prayer and in His Word. But we should not miss the fact that God has not brought all things to this final conclusion yet. It's interesting to me that Haggai and Zechariah were sent to do two things. Haggai was sent to encourage the people of Israel to keep rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah was sent to tell them about a temple city that was far beyond anything they'd be able to build. Why would they be told to keep building if the end point was something they couldn't actually attain? I think it's for the same reason that we ought to hear Zechariah's prophecy as a call to continue to build the church. The reason is that we build with hope. God gives us small tasks, tasks that may seem insignificant in the face of the glory that's promised. Raising a child, digging a hole, building a house, sharing the gospel, praying for a friend, suffering through a trial, studying, going to a Bible study—how can these things bring us any closer to the glory that's portrayed in Revelation 19-21? Well, God says, "Do these things, looking forward to something that you cannot even comprehend, knowing that I am building through these small things."

The church is not the new heavens and the new earth. The church is a

partial fulfillment of God's promises, but it is still a partial fulfillment, and even partial fulfillments are worth seeing. Even partial fulfillments are glorious and give us a glimpse of the greater glory that is to come. The church is seeing nations flood in through the fiery wall of the gospel and the Spirit. The church meets God often in the midst of fiery trials as their faith is tested, refined, and put on display for the world to see. And somehow, in all the labors of our hands that are done in faith, something of the greater glory is revealed.

This is the point, actually, of Hebrews chapter 12, where the writer speaks of the discipline of the Lord that we encounter in this life. Where he says, "Do not despise the discipline of the Lord; it shows that you are sons." You could rephrase that to say, "Do not despise the trials of the Lord; it shows that you're inside the wall." As he speaks to a church that's clearly suffering, he points them in Hebrews 12 to the glory that lies before them: to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. That's not something that the suffering Hebrew Christians could see in their life right then and there. It's a hope they tasted and longed to taste more of. But it is the glory that God is building right now through you and me.

God is shaking the world; He is spreading Jerusalem so large that you cannot build around it. He's bringing the nations in. And as a result, I'd encourage you to do what Zechariah 2 encourages you to do. Verse 10 of Zechariah 2: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst," declares the Lord. Sing and rejoice, for God dwells among you right now. Sing and rejoice, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of glory that is upon each one of you right now. Sing and rejoice, for the nations are coming in to God's holy city through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And sing and rejoice because God will come and dwell with His people one day in fullness. Let's pray.