

July 2 Lesson: Peace to the Nations

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 2, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Zechariah 9:9-13, 16-17

Key Verse:

On that day the LORD their God will save them, for they are the flock of his people, for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. (Zechariah 9:16)

Lesson Aims

- To ponder the vision of the King entering the holy city symbolizing the coming of peace
- To learn about the additional work that had to be done to achieve peace among the nations
- To visualize being a part of God's flock and shining like jewels on a crown on God's land
- To contemplate how the goodness, beauty, and abundance of peace causes human flourishing
- To make a connection between the prophecy of Zechariah and Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem

A Pivotal Lesson in Our Study of the Reign of God

In our summer study, entitled "God's Righteous Reign," we have come to the fifth and final lesson in the first of our three units. We learn once more about the Reign of God from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets before we move on to Matthew's gospel in the next unit. In the next unit, we will learn about the reign of God from Jesus and his teachings. You will see that this lesson from Zechariah serves as a pivotal lesson in more ways than one.

In the ordering of the Old Testament, the book of Zechariah occurs next to last. Zechariah (along with Haggai, just before it, and Malachi, just after it), addresses the time period nearest the close of the Old Testament witness. In other words, the prophet Zechariah offers a pivotal voice in the biblical narrative as we move from Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, the subject matter of our day's scripture lesson builds a bridge between the Old Testament promise of a King and the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus. All four gospels allude to the opening verse of our passage, with two of the gospels, Matthew and John, directly quoting it. The occasion in the gospels is the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. In other words, the New Testament Church saw a connection between this important event in the life and mission of Jesus and the message of the prophet who could foresee something like this happening.

We are going to lean into this passage in Zechariah and understand it from its original Old Testament frame of reference. Hopefully, when we have delved more deeply into its original meaning for God's people, Old Testament understandings will shed light on New Testament understandings, and vice versa.

Introducing Today's Theme: Peace to the Nations

Before we get into our scripture passage, which begins in the ninth verse of the ninth chapter of Zechariah, it is important that we look at the ground work that was laid in the first eight verses of the chapter. The ninth chapter of Zechariah, from which our scripture comes, begins the second of two major movements in the book. The main thing you need to know about the whole book of Zechariah is that this prophet has built his message upon night visions that God has shown him.

The first eight verses of the ninth chapter introduce this new major movement of divine action. In these verses, God is moving from north to south pronouncing judgment on the nations and cities that surrounded the Jews on their northern and western flank, starting with cities in Syria, moving south to the major Phoenician cities, then further south, still, to the important Philistine cities. These represented ancient, longstanding rivalries.

What God is doing in the vision is subduing these cities and disarming them. God is taking away from them that for which they were known, like the wisdom and wealth of Tyre and Sidon (Zechariah 9:2-4) and the pride of Philistia. (Zechariah 9:6) God is taking these strengths so they could no longer use them to oppress God's people.

God is also taking away from them their abominations, so they too can be "*a remnant for our God*" and "*be like a clan in Judah*" and "*be like the Jebusites,*" which were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. In other words, Zechariah envisioned God subduing nations and making them allies. (Zechariah 9:7) We're not told exactly how this will happen, only that it will happen. Finally, in verse 8, God says, "*Then I will encamp at my house as a guard, so that no one shall march to and fro; no oppressor shall again overrun them, for now I have seen with my own eyes.*" Notice how, in these verses, God is making a path toward peace.

The title of this lesson is "Peace to the Nations." We have already leaned into this theme once already in the second lesson of this quarter, entitled "God's Kingdom of Peace," from Isaiah 65. We are leaning into this theme once again and broadening our understanding even more from this scripture passage in Zechariah and in view of where this lesson takes us.

Your King Comes to You!

The powerful visual with which our scripture lesson begins is that of a king entering Jerusalem, triumphantly and victoriously while riding on, of all things, a young donkey.

**⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,**

**humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

It is after the path that has been created for peace that God's daughter, Zion (Jerusalem), is told to rejoice greatly and shout aloud. They are told at this moment to envision their king coming to them. They are told, "Your king is coming to you triumphant and victorious!" Remarkably enough, the king enters the city riding on a donkey, a young donkey at that. What would stand out to everyone in this vision is that the king is not riding in on a large and tall war horse. It is a clear signal that the king is making a statement. The king has established peace and wants everyone to know it and celebrate this amazing achievement.

The next verse continues to paint a picture of peace.

**¹⁰ He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.**

This verse continues the visual picture of disarmament and demilitarization. Even God's people, the Jews, from Ephraim in the north to Jerusalem in the south, will no longer have need for chariots, war horses, and battle bows. In this vision, God commands peace to the nations. Divine dominion exists from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth.

Why do you think that the crowd witnessing the coming of the King is being told to rejoice and shout aloud? What does it say to you that peace is such a prominent feature in the coming of the King and the coming of the reign of God? Take some time to imagine and talk about what it would mean for the Lord's dominion to stretch to the ends of the earth and for the nations to experience peace and share that experience.

The Work that Remains to Be Done

When the peace that our scripture describes is achieved, we realize from the verses that follow that there is still more work to be done.

**¹¹ As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.**

The goal that is still ahead for God is the freeing of prisoners from the waterless pit. Remember, in Genesis, that it was a waterless pit into which Joseph's brothers threw him and from which Joseph was subsequently rescued, then sold into slavery.

What God probably had in mind in Zechariah's vision were the Jews in Diaspora—the Jews scattered about from previous wars and oppression, still living in bondage and away from home. Until they returned, there was work to do.

What fuels this divine intervention pictured here is the blood of God's covenant with God's people. The earliest reference to the blood of the covenant is the strange ritual Moses was commanded to perform in his day when he slaughtered a bull and sprinkled its blood on the people as a sign of God's covenant with them. Blood from a sacrificed animal was always meant to convey that God's claim on his people costs something dear. Redemption is costly.

In this case of these exiles, scattered around the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, the blood of the covenant was meant to convey the fact that their redemption as exiles and captives was won through the sacrifice of their brothers and sisters and their own patient endurance through oppression, persecution, and war.

**¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.**

As long as God's people were scattered and far from home, God wanted these “prisoners of hope” to know that God was steadfastly and actively working on their behalf. God intended to return them to their stronghold in Zion—the spiritual center of their universe. God intended to restore to them double in terms of what they had lost.

The next verse appears to present a contradiction to the picture of peace to the nations. As long as God's people are scattered and imprisoned away from their spiritual home, there is yet a battle to be won.

**¹³ For I have bent Judah as my bow;
I have made Ephraim its arrow.
I will arouse your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and wield you like a warrior's sword.**

This is the language of spiritual warfare. It is God's story among his people, Judah (the southern kingdom) and Ephraim (the northern kingdom), now united, that formed the bow and arrow in this continued spiritual battle. Greece in this context probably represented the farthest reaches of where God's people had been taken in multiple, relentless campaigns to scatter God's people and take them away from their home. The idea is that God will not rest until God has subdued the oppressors over God's people, so that the prisoners of hope who were far from home could return and experience divine restoration.

If peace is more than the absence of conflict, what do you feel needs to be accomplished to achieve peace besides the absence of conflict and war?

Shining Jewels on the Crown of the God Who Reigns

In all the lessons, thus far, the prophets have been showing us pictures of the reign of God. Each picture provides a different angle of vision. The picture that Zechariah has been presenting us gives us a picture of the king entering triumphantly and victorious, ushering in a reign of peace. Then, God goes out to gather scattered prisoners of hope back to the peace and freedom of their spiritual home.

**¹⁶ On that day the LORD their God will save them,
for they are the flock of his people,
for like the jewels of a crown
they shall shine on his land.**

On that day, whatever future day it is, the Lord their God will save them from a life of being displaced and alienated from God's people. As their shepherd, God will gather them back into the fold; for they never ceased being the flock of God's people.

Another image has to do with a crown. Crowns are, of course, associated with the reign of a king. In this case, the crown is bejeweled with the people under God's reign. God "wears" them in a sense. In this vision, God's people, living in peace, shine on the land that belongs entirely to God.

**¹⁷ For what goodness and beauty are his!
Grain shall make the young men flourish,
and new wine the young women.**

The images of God's peaceful reign abound. Peace represents an abundant and equitable sharing of divine goodness. Peace is breathtakingly beautiful. The goodness and beauty of it all belongs to God and flows from God. Abundant grain and abundant wine are symbols of divine plenty, and they represent God's hospitality and generosity. These are symbols of all that makes men and women flourish. We are meant to flourish in peace and freedom and to be at-home in God's world.

How does God's peaceful reign speak of God's goodness? How does it speak of God's beauty? How would God's peaceful reign cause men and women to flourish?

Dedicating Ourselves to Peace

A couple of lessons ago, I mentioned the hymn, "This Is My Father's World," written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901. The words of the last verse bear repeating: "*This is my Father's world | O let me ne'er forget | That though the wrong seems oft so strong | God is the Ruler yet. | This is my Father's world: | Why should my heart be sad? | The Lord is King: | let the heaven's ring! | God reigns; let the earth be glad!*"

Let's be honest. The wrong that often seems so strong is a world beset by war, competition, division, in-fighting, hostility toward those who do not look like us, open threats of violence, and the glorification of violence. What I see pasted more and more on bumpers and windshields seems hardly consistent with the beauty and goodness of God's peaceful reign.

Whenever I go to Washington, D.C., I make a pilgrimage to the memorial dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I am moved every time I see the centerpiece, Dr. King's figure, a champion of *hope*, who is carved out of a symbolic mountain of *despair*. I also like to read the quotations from his speeches that adorn the walls on either side. Many of them are dedicated to peace.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." (Strength to Love, 1963)

"If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective." (Christmas sermon, Atlanta, Georgia, 1967)

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (Letter from Birmingham, Alabama jail, April 16, 1963)

"We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience." (Montgomery, Alabama, March 25, 1965)

"True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." (Stride Toward Freedom, 1958)

One book I would recommend anyone to read is *Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*, by The Arbinger Institute. In some ways, it is an easy book to read, and in other ways, it is not an easy book to read. What makes the book a challenging read is that it calls us to get off the sidelines and to put its principles into action. Working for peace is not the path of least resistance. The path of least resistance is to retreat into our corners and allow suspicion and conflict to fester.

What makes peace such a challenging endeavor? Do you ever feel a sense of resignation that conflict and oppression will always be with us? What impact does this vision have for you knowing that peace is so central to the coming of the reign of God?

The Connection with Jesus

All four gospels allude to Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem as the coming of the King represented in Zechariah. Remember that Jesus' entrance into the city would have been a big event. His movement had largely centered in the northern Galilee region. Being away from the power-center of Jerusalem had allowed the movement to grow without the level of opposition that could have squelched the movement. There was a high level of receptivity to Jesus in the Galilee region. The movement had grown in response to the power of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry. As Jesus neared Jerusalem, expectations had grown tremendously.

In one way, Jesus did not play down the sense of expectation. He played it up. The scriptures let us in on the fact that Jesus staged his entrance. Even the choice of the donkey that was to transport him was planned. Jesus wanted to ride into the city on a donkey to make a direct connection to the king in the passage in Zechariah. Jesus identified with the King envisioned in God's peaceful reign.

The crowd got caught up in this because they knew the Messianic overtones of this choreographed action. They laid palm branches on the road before him and shouted "Hosannas." The choice Jesus made in how he entered the city also set his course for the final week before his crucifixion.

Many people mistakenly wanted Jesus to correspond to their idea of a Messiah in which he would assume the role of a military leader and lead his people to overthrow their Roman oppressors. People recognized the authority that came through the way he taught. The fact that his authority extended to the healing of diseases and the casting out of demons would also not be lost on people. If Jesus had wanted, he could have sounded the call and people would have followed him in an armed revolt, and help him set up an earthly kingdom like the empires of the world they had known.

This is why Jesus chose a donkey on which to ride into the city of Jerusalem, not a war horse. Jesus did not intend to lead people into armed conflict. Jesus wanted to move people away from this notion.

We can see both his commitment to the reign of God and the rejection of the ways of the world at the beginning of his ministry, when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. In the third temptation, according to Matthew, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil said to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." It was then and there that Jesus told Satan to leave him, and quoted the first commandment, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus intended to keep God first in everything he did. He rejected the ways of the devil and the ways of the world in all things related to the kingdom of God. Jesus was totally aligned with the reign of God in terms of his goals *and* the means he used to achieve those goals. All his methods had to align with the reign of God. Jesus' ministry revealed the reign of God.

This is why, when Peter cut off the ear of one of those who came to arrest Jesus, Jesus healed the man's ear, and told Peter, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will die by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:52-54) Jesus handed himself over to the authorities rather than rebel against them, even though it meant going to the cross, for Jesus knew that the power of self-giving, suffering love was more powerful than any weapon fashioned by humans. The way of love is perfectly aligned with the reign of God.

This is why, when the religious leaders accused Jesus of leading an insurrection, Jesus told Pilate at his trial about the nature of the kingdom he wanted to establish. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom was of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me

from being handed over to the [religious leaders]. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” (John 18:36) The religious leaders intentionally took Jesus’ words about a kingdom out of their rightful context and used those words against him. Jesus advocated not for an earthly kingdom to be brought on earth through worldly means. Jesus taught about the reign of God, he worked tirelessly on behalf of God’s reign, and he gave his life for it.

Every time we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” In the next unit, prepare to explore the reign of God through Jesus’ words and teachings.

What do you think of the connection between the prophecy in Zechariah and Jesus’ fulfillment of that prophecy in his entrance into the city of Jerusalem? What does it reveal about Jesus’ understanding of his own ministry? What does it reveal about Jesus’ vision of the reign of God? How has your appreciation of Jesus’ peaceful methods grown as a result of this lesson?

Prayer

Gracious God, Your servant Zechariah saw visions of the peace that is central to Your vision of Your reign in the world. Grant us that same vision, that we might join you in the work of peace, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, both now and forevermore, Amen.

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