

# A Flying Scroll, A Basket, and the Man We All Need

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 June 2016

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Malcolm, thank you very much for reading, and if you keep your Bibles open, Zechariah chapter 5, that would really help me, on page 952. The Bible is divided into two sections. There's the Old Testament, which was written before Jesus came, and for hundreds of years promised that God would send someone into the world.

Then there's the New Testament, written after Jesus came, describing how he'd fulfilled those promises and what that means for us today. So at the moment at St. Silas, you're joining us in our fifth week, listening to this prophet, Zechariah, from the Old Testament, about 500 BC, about 500 years before Jesus.

And in Zechariah's dream there, we've had the horseman of the apocalypse, we've had this woman in a basket, being carried along by two other women with wings. And you might be thinking, what was Zechariah on, as he had this dream?

Zechariah is a bit like modern art, so he's using images as a powerful way to convey truth to us. But we need God's help to understand God's message, so let's pray.

Let me pray as we ask for God's help to hear from him. Father God, you know where we stand with you, and you know what we believe about you this morning. But we are all people who gather seeking truth.

[ 1 : 1 9 ]     And so we ask that you will speak to each one of us this morning, and open our minds that we might know who you are, and open our hearts to respond rightly to you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So Jesus treated the whole of the Old Testament, it had been written before he came, as God's word to us. That's what we believe it is at St. Silas.

And when we look at Zechariah's dreams, we're thinking about the future. Lots of his visions were about things that still haven't happened yet. They're about the end of things in our world.

I don't know whether you've ever thought before about whether you'd actually like to know the future. I guess it depends what we might want to know about the future. In the movie Back to the Future 2, which some of you might be old enough to remember, the villain Biff went back in time from the distant future.

Now, Back to the Future 2 was made in 1985, so the distant future was 2015. So it was kind of in the news last year, because now it's not the distant future, and we're not using the hoverboards that were promised in the film.

[ 2 : 2 7 ]     But Biff went back in time from 2015 to 1955, and he gave his previous self an almanac of all the sports results for 40 years, so that he could then use them to get very rich betting.

And we might think that would be a good thing to know about the future. But of course, there are lots of things about the future that we might prefer not to know. And that's largely the way that God has made things in our lives, that our lives have surprises in them.

And things come at us that we weren't expecting. But I take it there are times when it would be enormously helpful to know what's going to happen. And we'd want to know what's going to happen, even if it was something very shocking, and even if it would require radical action from us.

In 2005, Tilly Smith was on holiday in Phuket, when the tide rushed out, and the water started to bubble, and the boats on the horizon were bobbing up and down.

And Tilly had studied tsunamis in her geography class just a few weeks before. So she realized what was going to happen. She told her parents. They shouted across the beach.

[ 3 : 38 ] The beach and the hotels were evacuated. And thanks to Tilly knowing what was going to happen, everyone on that beach was saved. So Tilly had shocking news about the future, but she knew people had to hear it so they would take radical action.

Well, through Zechariah, God tells us about the future so that we can react, so that we can live today in light of what's going to happen. You might be thinking, here is a guest, but why would I take Zechariah's vision seriously?

Well, the extraordinary thing about Zechariah is that lots of what he predicted wasn't about what we're still waiting for now in the future, but was about God's promised one coming into the world.

And Zechariah's predictions about Jesus coming, even though they were 500 years away, were fulfilled with extraordinary precision. So everything that Zechariah predicted about the future that could have happened so far has come true.

We can trust him about what's going to happen later. So let's dive in and listen to him. It's the 15th of February, 519 BC, and Zechariah has this dream. At that time, God had a people who belonged to him.

[ 4 : 52 ] They lived together in the land around Jerusalem. Babylon was an empire in the north. They'd come and sacked Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple. And that was disastrous for the people because the temple was how they knew that God was with them.

The temple was a way of saying, well, God is with us because we've got the temple. Now it was gone. And the first thing we see Zechariah see this morning in our kind of modern art is a scroll, a scroll that points to God's rule.

Let me read again verse 1 of chapter 5. I looked again, and there before me was a flying scroll. So this is the scroll of God's law, verse 3.

And the angel 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, everyone who swears falsely will be banished. So what this scroll reveals to us today is that God is extremely concerned about how we live.

[ 5 : 57 ] It's got two of God's commands on it, but they are representative of God's moral code, that God has a perfect moral character, and he is concerned for how we treat him.

Now the idea that there is a God who can tell us about what's right and wrong is very controversial today. We kind of think, well, why can't I make up my own mind what's right and wrong?

What right does God have to tell me? But I want to suggest that that being a God like this is the only hope for our world today. You see, if there is no God, then right and wrong don't really exist.

Good and evil, they're just categories that we make up. But when we look at the world around us, there are clearly people doing things that we think are wrong, even if they think it's okay.

And yet without God, there's no way to establish that our views are any more valid than theirs. Our values, just like theirs, are just based on blind, impersonal forces.

[ 6 : 59 ] There was a professor at Yale Law School, Arthur Leff, who talked about this. He didn't believe in God, but he was pushing atheism to its logical conclusions. And he said, really, without God, humanity is just like children in the playground.

When children are playing in the playground, I don't know if you remember this from being a child, but a child might start to establish some rules and say, we've all got to do this or you can't do that. And the classic response from other children will be, says who?

Says who? What right do you have to tell me what to do? Well, when adults talk about morality in a world without God, what Arthur Leff said was, none of us can get over the grand says who?

What right do we have to declare anything right or wrong? And he saw how devastating this was. He said, we want to still say that napping babies is wrong.

We want to say it's wrong to starve the poor, to buy and sell human beings. We want to say that it was good and honorable to stand up against Hitler and Idi Amin and Stalin and Pol Pot.

[ 8 : 04 ] But, says who? And he finished his paper by saying, God help us. Tragic. Not believing in God. A good example today, I guess, would be that most of us, I think perhaps all of us, would believe that humans have rights.

That every human being has certain inalienable human rights. But without God, you can't, there is no basis for human rights. You can't ground them in anything if there is no God.

And yet we live as though they're there. It's not consistent if there is no God. And I want to suggest, just suggest, perhaps, our strong feelings of right and wrong are a clue that there really is a God who cares about right and wrong and who made us in his image.

And that's why we have these strong feelings about morality. Well, what else do we learn from Zechariah's scroll? Well, it goes everywhere. You notice that? So, if you look at verse 4, the Lord Almighty declares, I will send it out and it will enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by my name.

You see what it's saying? God sees everything. Everything we've ever thought and said and done. And again, that's good news for our world. I don't know if any of you have watched the ITV drama that's just been on recently, The Secret.

[ 9 : 26 ] It's controversial because it's about a crime that people are still in living memory of. It was based on a true story about the dentist Colin Howell, played by James Nesbitt, and a Sunday school teacher, Hazelby Cannon, both upstanding members of their Christian community in Northern Ireland.

And they murdered their own spouses so that they could be together. And they kept it a secret for decades. So one of the chilling things about the drama, The Secret, was the hypocrisy that these two characters continued to be well-respected members of their community.

And we hate that. Well, the message here is that God sees what's going on behind closed doors. So what will God do about it? Well, that's our second image.

We've seen a scroll that points to God's rule. Secondly, there are horses that give God rest. If you have a look at chapter 6, verse 1. I looked up again, and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains, mountains of bronze.

The first chariot had red horses, the second black, the third white, and the fourth dappled, all of them powerful. Now, the horses symbolize the Spirit of God.

[ 10 : 42 ] And in verse 5, it says, these are the four spirits of heaven going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world. The reason there are four colors is because there's four points of the compass.

It's a way of saying these horses, the Spirit of God is going to go everywhere. And they set off at God's command in verse 7, and the result comes in verse 8. Verse 8, God says, look, those going towards the north country have given my spirit rest in the land of the north.

So by the action of God's Spirit, of these horses, God's Spirit will become at rest. Why? Well, today, as God looks at the world, He is not at rest.

He is passionately disturbed by the way that we treat Him and the way we treat one another as humanity. And this image, if you imagine, in the ancient world, the image of horses and chariots was of unstoppable military power.

And it's a picture of the judgment that God promises He will bring to our world. That God will establish His own good order over His world one day.

[ 11 : 55 ] So today, God gives us the choice as to whether we want to turn to God and accept Him as our God. But one day, God warns us in the Bible there won't be that choice anymore.

That God will take forcible rule over the places where He is ignored and rejected as He puts the world right and He holds people to account. It's disturbing, isn't it?

But we need to remember that because the world today without God so often seems to work. I need to remember that. We're all choosing day by day what we want to build our life on to bring us happiness.

I was talking to a friend recently, a Christian friend, about the personal battle I sometimes feel when I see how much money my non-Christian mates earn, some of them, and spend on themselves.

And it makes me think, oh, that just works. I need to start spending my money on myself. And my mate said to me, to make me feel better, he said, yes, Martin, but are they really happy?

[ 12 : 57 ] And I said, yes, they are, to be honest. I really do think they are very happy. You see, the non-Christian life often seems to work. I'm not naive to that as a minister.

But the Bible warns us here that it's not going to be the same forever. And we might find the idea of God coming to judge really unattractive.

We might find it hard. But just as with the scroll and how I describe it, I think it does give us hope for the world, I want to suggest that these horses are good news for our world as well.

Just last week, I was reading in the news about a recent debate that's been in Westminster about the Islamic State and what to do about the Islamic State. And during this debate, the key objective by some of the MPs was to have our Houses of Parliament declare that what the Islamic State are doing in the way that they are crucifying Christians and Yazidi minority, the Yazidi religious minority, that it's genocide.

They want the term genocide used about it. And it was passed unanimously in the Houses of Parliament that this is genocide. But why does that matter?

[ 14 : 11 ] Why have our MPs debate what term to call it? Well, David Burroughs, MP, said this. He said, the reason it was important today is because we must ensure that no matter how long it takes, no matter how many years it takes, there is always the possibility that through courts like the International Criminal Court, eventually, we'll be able to bring the perpetrators to justice.

That's why we have to call it genocide, so that the International Criminal Courts can kick in and we can bring people to justice. Do you see why that's important to us today?

We long for there to be justice in the world. And the good news of the Bible is that God loves everyone. But that means he loves the victims and the way they're being treated.

It is good news for the world that his horsemen are coming. It's good news for a world where children are forced to be soldiers in places like Sierra Leone during the Civil War and go to villages and amputate the limbs of other children.

Knowing there is a God who sees the world today and will bring perfect justice gives us hope. The problem for us, though, is that God's justice convicts all of us.

[ 15 : 34 ] For we know we're not the people we ought to be. If you just think about what was written on that giant scroll, they were examples of God's perfect law, commands that you should never steal from anyone ever and you should never tell a lie.

And God holds everything up in our lives against the scroll of his perfect law. He sees every harmful or hateful thought we've ever had. He knows every internet page we've ever visited.

So I used to think before I became a Christian that maybe you could rank everybody who'd ever lived from kind of the worst person who's ever lived down here to the best person who's ever lived up here and you might put someone like Hitler or Stalin down there and I don't know you might put Mother Teresa up here and there might be a line at which God would cut things off and as long as you were just above the line you'd be alright with God.

But when you look at the Bible what Jesus taught us and what the Bible says is that if you could rank everybody like that from the worst to the best person who's ever lived the standard that we need to please God isn't somewhere in the middle the standard that we need is in the sky none of us is anywhere near good enough for God.

So I don't take any pleasure in saying this at all but this section of Zechariah is one of the most haunting warnings in the whole Bible a scroll pointing to God's good rule and horses that he promises will bring him rest.

[ 17 : 02 ] So what can we do about it? Well that's our third point a basket that offers God's pardon. Have a look with me at verse 6 of chapter 5. I asked what is it?

He replied this is the angel speaking to Zechariah it is a measuring basket and he added this is the iniquity of the people throughout the land. Then the 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 the lead cover down over its mouth. It's really quite grotesque isn't it? There's this woman sitting in a basket far too small for her and she personifies everything that the people have ever done wrong.

But God is about to purify his people. Look at verse 9 then I looked up and there before me were two women with the wind in their wings they had wings like those of a stork 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. It's being taken away from people who acknowledge God out of their land.

[ 18 : 17 ] So God promises here that if you do turn to him and trust him and become one of his people he will take your guilt far away. It's the exact opposite of the judgment that we deserve.

We deserve to be pushed far away from God. God says you can come to me and I'll push your guilt away. Just imagine imagine sitting down one day and having a basket and having loads of pieces of paper and a pen and trying to write down everything that you've ever done wrong.

Everything you've ever thought or said that's wrong. And on every piece of paper as you write something putting it in the basket. And imagine obviously you might start with some big things in your life that perhaps you feel guilty about you wish you hadn't done.

Imagine you had to do that all day so you really started to think through everything that you feel ashamed of. Everything you wish you could turn back the clock on.

You start thinking about your thought life about perhaps things other people don't know about. People perhaps wouldn't even object to but you know what is wrong.

[ 19 : 27 ] Selfish ambition pride failing to help people in need and you fill your basket this basket becomes your basket of shame and then suddenly the basket is carried away and you're promised you never have to think about those things ever again they've been dealt with for you.

Well God promises that here he says if you come to me I've dealt with it because I love you I will not treat you as though you did any of those things.

so how will he do that? Well that's our final point this morning after the basket that offers God's wonderful pardon his forgiveness fourthly we see a king who will bring God's presence.

Zechariah finally wakes up and God says to him in verse 9 make a crown verse 9 the word of the Lord the word of the Lord came to me take silver and gold from the exiles who have arrived from Babylon go the same day to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah take the silver and gold and make a crown.

What God is saying here is that for him to accomplish his plans for the world and him to forgive his people he needs a king he needs a king and the people at this time they knew they needed a king because one had been promised for centuries a man who would come who would lead the people in keeping God's commands and bringing God's perfect rule to the world.

[ 20 : 56 ] So Zechariah was told make a crown is this the king that they need? Well have a look at verse 11 make a crown and set it on the head of the high priest Joshua son of Jehozadak so who is this priest king?

Verse 12 tell him this is what the Lord Almighty says here is the man whose name is the branch and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord.

Well that word the branch is a Bible word for the one God had promised would come into the world God's promised rescuing king he's been promised for hundreds of years by this point and here we're learning that he'll be a king whose influence will branch out across the whole world God is going to achieve his plan to put the world right through this king and yet who could it be because to be a king like that for God you'd have to live a perfect life and the message of the New Testament is that now we have such a king that Jesus was born in the promised royal line a descendant of the right king King David and after he died he was raised to life seen alive again as God's way of showing us that he has crowned him as his king as his king the king of glory Hebrews chapter 1 says this about him in the New Testament about the son God says your throne oh God will last forever and ever a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom back in Zechariah in 500 BC there is a breathtaking surprise all through the Bible

God had promised a king but had also given his people a priest and a priest is a bit like your lawyer before God if you're called on trial in the most senior courts in the land you need a particular kind of lawyer who has the right to speak in those courts well a priest is like a lawyer like that it's a representative for you you can come into the throne room of heaven and plead your case for you Zechariah is to place the crown on the head of this priest at the time Joshua to demonstrate that God will send into the world an ultimate priest who will also be the ultimate king says it in verse 13 it is he who will build the temple of the Lord and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne and he will be a priest on his throne and there will be harmony between the two the problem for humanity with needing a priest is that in order to be a priest he'd have the right to go before God he'd have to be one of us he'd have to be human but he'd have to be perfect to stand before God and then Jesus of Nazareth comes he lives the life we should have lived he loves old young rich poor he loved everyone he loved God and he dies on the cross in obedience to God the New Testament again explains it like this

Hebrews 2 Jesus had to be made like them fully human in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people so in order for us to have our guilt taken away we have to have a priest king come into the world and this was the mission of Jesus a mission that caused him in the garden of Gethsemane as he looked the next day at what he would face in the agony of the cross he said to God if there's any other way take this cup from me but there was no other way he had to endure suffering to the point of death to be our priest now Jesus can stand in the throne room of God before God and say of any of us who put our trust in him father forgive them they're with me and I died for them forgive them and God's promise of the basket of our guilt being taken away is fulfilled and if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian

[ 25 : 06 ] I just want to urge you with everything I've got to take a fresh look at Jesus Zechariah warns us here that this future is coming where there will be a day of reckoning before God and he promises us God has made a way for any of us whatever we've done to have our guilt taken away by turning back to God through Jesus our priest king we've got some copies at the back of John's gospel John's account of Jesus life why not just take one away and take a fresh look at him would you come back here to St Silas to keep thinking but let me close with a word for those of us who are already Christians see the challenge in Zechariah is for us to be so inspired by God's plan here that we obey God today the flying scroll shows us the importance to God of purity among his people and in a place like St Silas let me say I think we need to remember that and take it seriously it's a challenge to examine our own hearts before God the importance of purity sexually the importance of purity with our handling of our money and greed it's so easy to end up throwing ourselves into church activity perhaps having strategies for helping the poor strategies for reaching out these things are great things but it's easy to throw ourselves into that while not fighting to be godly to live for God confusing busyness with godliness well let's fix our eyes on the majestic priest king

God has sent into our world amazingly fulfilling this Zechariah promise so that we joyfully choose to live for him in the words of a hymn writer Isaac Watts he said this about Jesus Jesus my great high priest offered his blood and died my guilty conscience seeks no sacrifice beside his powerful blood did once atone and now it pleads before the throne to this dear surety's hand will I commit my cause he answers and fulfills his father's broken laws behold my soul at freedom set my surety paid the dreadful debt my advocate appears for my defense on high the father bows his ears and lays his thunder by not all that hell or sin can say shall turn his heart his love away father in heaven we thank you so much that you look on us as right with you thanks to the great work of the lord Jesus Christ that he is the king we need and the high priest we need father we thank you for your promise that one day you will put the world right that your spirit will come and you will put an end to wickedness and goodness will win and so father we pray that inspired by your plan and inspired by the work of your great priest king we will strive to live for you in Jesus name amen