

ZECHARIAH

ON THAT DAY

Zechariah, with its opulent and sometimes terrifying imagery of the coming 'day of the Lord', is a hard and challenging prophecy to read. Yet it will repay study richly, when seen in its context not only in the Old Testament, but as a promise of the Lord Jesus. Jesus quotes Zechariah as he approaches his own crucifixion in Jerusalem: so to understand Zechariah is to understand the mission of the Lord Jesus in all its glory.



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8 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

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SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

TIM McMAHON



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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- short sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

THE STORY OF ZECHARIAH— GOD'S MASSIVE PLAN [An overview]

WHEN IS IT RIGHT TO SETTLE FOR less than the best? Sometimes such a strategy can work in our favour—for example, when you need to be somewhere in a hurry, better the taxi that's there than the Rolls Royce that isn't. At other times it can be disastrous—settling for the second-hand parachute because it happens to be a bargain-base-ment price is asking for trouble.

Settling for less than the best in the *Christian* life falls into the 'disastrous' category, as a look at the Bible (including Zechariah) will show. God's people have *always* been tempted to settle for less than what God has promised, and to give up seeking to keep the commands related to his promises. After Israel escaped from slavery in Egypt, nearly all the Israelites decided that dying in the desert was preferable

to fighting the Canaanites as God had instructed. As a result, they missed out on entering the Promised Land (Num 14:1-4, 21-23). Then their descendants, once established in the land, repeatedly adopted the idolatrous practices of the surrounding nations—rather than seeking to be a holy people and a light to the nations as God had commanded. After repeated warnings through his prophets, God brought the Babylonian army against Jerusalem to sack the city and deport the inhabitants. Each time God's people took an apparently easier way than obedience to his command, exile followed—40 years of wilderness wanderings, 70 years in Babylon.

In these studies on the book of Zechariah, we turn to the last period of Old Testament history—to the time when an Israelite remnant has returned

from exile in Babylon to resettle the Promised Land. Sadly, but predictably, we find the people falling into the same pattern as their forefathers. They settle for short-term ease rather than battle to see the promise of God fulfilled. They fail to obey God's specific command to their generation—to rebuild the temple destroyed by the Babylonians. They look inward rather than see themselves as the means of blessing for the nations.

So God gives Zechariah the task of lifting his people's horizons. They are to remember the glorious promises that God made in the past but are yet to be fulfilled. They are to see their present struggles and continued obedience as part of the achievement of these promises. They are to proclaim afresh the great restoration that God will bring about for the whole world when he fulfils his promises. Zechariah speaks of these

fulfilments happening “on that day”—a phrase repeated 18 times in his prophecy.

Like Israel, we stand to learn much from Zechariah's words. We too battle with the temptation to settle for less than God has called us to. We doubt the importance of our present obedience. We repeatedly lose sight of the coming day when God will finally fulfil all his promises.

Because Jesus often quoted from Zechariah to interpret his ministry, the prophecies in this book will mean even more to us than they did to Zechariah's original hearers. We will see how the prophecies have begun to be fulfilled—how “that day” arrived with Jesus' ministry. And we will be encouraged to live with full certainty that all that God has promised will finally be achieved when Jesus returns “on that day”.

Setting the scene

1. What pressures and temptations do we face when (like Israel) we seem to be a tiny and overwhelmed minority in God's world? (You may like to consider work, school or your local community or social group.)

OUR PRESSURES ARE NOT UNLIKE the pressures Israel was under. Having identified with some of the pressures Israel was facing, let's now look at things from Zechariah's perspective. In this study, we will look at Israel's *past*, *present* and *future* in overview. To remind ourselves of what lay in the

past—from Zechariah's point of view—we will read what he says about it. So we will jump into the book at the halfway mark: Zechariah 7. We will then pick and choose some key passages from the rest of Zechariah that help us consider Israel's past, present and future in more detail.¹

God's commands in the *past*

Read Zechariah 7:8-14.

2. What is the focus of the Lord's commands (vv. 8-10; see sidebar)?
3. What was the essence of Israel's sin (vv.11-12)? How was this shown?
4. What was the Lord's response (vv.13-14)?

The heart of God's law

It is sometimes said that Old Testament law focuses on external behaviour, while the New Testament focuses on the heart. But closer examination shows repeated appeals in God's law for a heart response from his people (e.g. Deut 6:5, 29:18, 30:14). Having a heart like God's was meant to shape each individual's life and have glorious consequences for the nation. Widows and orphans would be cared for, as would foreigners in their midst. The king's commitment to justice would become famous throughout the world. Israel would be known as "a wise and understanding people" (Deut 4:6). David was considered the ideal king because he was "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam 13:14).

God's appeal in the *present*

Read Zechariah 1:1-6.

5. What do we learn about the Lord's present attitude towards his people (vv. 3-4)?

6. If the people respond to God as they should, why can they be confident (vv. 5-6)?

Read Zechariah 6:15.

7. What responsibilities do God's people have?

8. What will happen if they fulfil their responsibilities?

God's promise for the *future*

9. What does the Lord promise he will do?

- 8:7-8

- 8:20-22

- 9:9-10

The Lord uses a great deal of imagery to describe what it will be like "on that day". We will look at the details of these passages in later studies. For the moment, let's quickly get a general sense of what "that day" will be like.

10. Fill in the following table, focusing on what it will be like *for God's people* "on that day".

Passage	Image	What will it be like for God's people?
9:16		
12:3		
12:4		
12:6		
12:8-9		

11. Now fill in the following table, this time focusing on *what else will happen* "on that day".

Passage	Image or picture	What else will happen "on that day"?
12:11		
13:1		
13:2		
13:4		
14:6-7		
14:8		
14:9		
14:20-21		

People and events to come

As well as proclaiming what will happen when God fulfils his promises "on that day", Zechariah tells us much about particular persons God will use to bring about the fulfilment of his plans. Specifically, he describes the essential role of High Priest Joshua (chapter 3); the building efforts of King Zerubbabel (chapter 4); the priestly and kingly roles exercised by an enigmatic figure called "the Branch" (chapter 6); and various actions by different shepherds (chapters 11, 13). It is therefore not surprising that Zechariah's message becomes an important source used by the Gospel writers to

» Implications

Think back over Zechariah's imagery describing God's people and the fulfilment of all his promises "on that day" (see sidebar). How does this affect your attitude to:

- your own failures?
- the failures of God's people today?

-
- the importance of God's people for the world, even though we seem weak and insignificant?

interpret Jesus' ministry. Zechariah's apocalyptic imagery describing events "on that day" also influences Jesus' teaching on the Mount of Olives in response to the disciples' question about the signs of the end of the age (Matt 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Imagery from Zechariah recurs in the book of Revelation, which is not surprising given that, like Zechariah, Revelation is also speaking about the Day of the Lord. We will consider some of these New Testament echoes of Zechariah in later studies.

- the future?

» Give thanks and pray

We have caught a glimpse in this study of the massive scale of God's promises for his people, and of the cosmic action that will be required to bring them about.

- Give thanks to God that he considers us so important that he is willing to go to great lengths to have us participate in bringing about his future plans.
- Pray that God will give you a much deeper understanding of how profoundly short we fall of the heart righteousness that he intended for us, and of what is required for him to deal with our problem.
- Pray that you get a clearer picture through these studies of the breathtaking future God has secured for us and will allow us to experience fully "on that day".

Endnote

1. Normally we would prefer *not* to jump from place to place within a Bible book. But there are good and helpful reasons for exercising a bit of liberty in the study of Zechariah; including the fact that it will help us understand background that would have been obvious to the early hearers. We will mention some further reasons in study 2. You will be helping your own understanding a lot, however, by reading through Zechariah more than once, from beginning to end, in your own time.