

STUDY GUIDES



An Assurance of God's Glorious Kingdom for His Church Today

Zechariah 14:1-9

Brock McCoy

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About TGH Study Guides

The Greater Heritage *Study Guides* are concise yet thorough booklets that shed light on important Biblical truths, as well as significant moments and figures in church history.

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(Zechariah 14:1-9) by Brock McCoy
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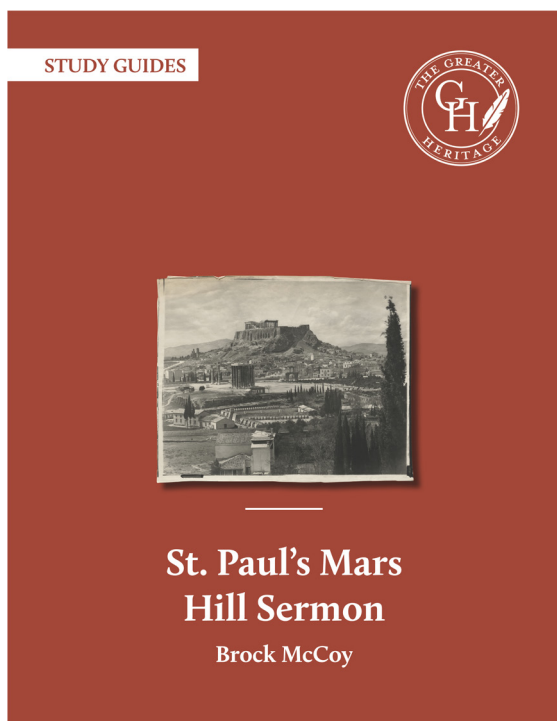
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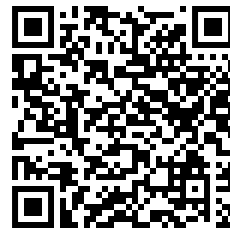
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Introduction

All of Israel's history can be summed up in this sequence: chosen, privileged, presumptuous, rebellious.¹ Israel was to be God's holy nation. A people set apart to represent the glory and perfection of God. It was through Israel that God chose to bring redemption into the world (Gen. 12:1-3). A brief survey of the Old Testament demonstrates that God did in fact bring redemption into the world through the nation of Israel. However, this was not due to Israel's ability to keep the covenant, but rather God's eternal grace and mercy.

The prophet Zechariah expounded upon this truth throughout his ministry. Being born during a dark era in Israel's history, Zechariah was appointed to proclaim the hope and faithfulness of God. Zechariah's message of future restoration was meant to encourage the Israelites amidst their suffering and depravity. After King Nebuchadnezzar leveled Jerusalem in 587 B.C., Judah ceased to exist. However, when it seemed that Israel had lost all hope due to their sinfulness, God extended his blessings by employing historical developments in the ancient Near East to restore the nation.² Through Zechariah, God prophesied such physical and spiritual restoration. One would think that Zechariah's prophecies would have been met with much thankfulness and celebration. Instead, according to Matthew 23:25, Zechariah is believed to have been martyred by the Israelites.

Zechariah's prophecy fits into the metanarrative of Scripture perfectly as it foreshadowed a day in which God would provide eternal security and restoration for His people. Zechariah 14:1-21 establishes this truth profoundly and descriptively. Interpreting some of the prophecy within the book is somewhat difficult for the 21st century Christian today. Nevertheless, the church of Christ is still able to look back on the ministry of King Jesus and recognize that God has fulfilled much of this prophecy already through Jesus' life. Zechariah's prophecy provides much insight into the doctrine of last things.³

Context

Zechariah's ministry occurred during a very uncertain period of Israel's history. The chronology of Zechariah's ministry is keyed to the reign of the Persian king Darius (521-486 B.C.).⁴ Zechariah and Haggai both prophesied to the nation of Israel after their return from Babylonian exile. Both Nehemiah and Ezra mention Zechariah in their writings (Neh. 12:4, Ezra 5:2). Despite returning from captivity, the Hebrews had nothing to offer both physically and spiritually.

God raised up Zechariah to rebuke, exhort, and encourage the Hebrews as they returned to the promise land.⁵ It was by the decree of king Cyrus that the Hebrews were allowed back into the land as prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1-6). In spite of the dark days Israel had just recently experienced, they were now beginning to experience the restoration God promised. There was an established peace in the land with the Persian empire controlling the political sphere. The Hebrews were finally allowed back into the land from which they were forcefully removed. Also, they were allowed to rebuild the

temple and the city walls. From a geographical, national, and political perspective, things were definitely improving by God's provision.

Nevertheless, the people still found themselves repeating the same sinful pattern that led their forefathers into captivity in the first place.

Zechariah's prophetic ministry began with a message of true repentance (1:1-6). Amidst God's preserving grace, the people were still repeating that which led to their prior demise. Therefore, God's first word through Zechariah was intended to initiate repentance and spiritual renewal within the hearts of the people. Only spiritual renewal could foster true worship and meaningful service in the temple, which was now under construction at the prompting of the prophet Haggai.⁶ Zechariah wanted the people to recognize the folly of repeating the same mistakes.

Building upon the prelude, Zechariah was given a series of visions by God. These visions are contained within chapters 1 through 6 (1:15-6:15). These visions each have different interpretations that are unique in and of themselves. While these visions are unique from one another, they all work together in revealing spiritual truths to God's people. Moving beyond the visions, Zechariah gave two oracles addressing the topic of fasting (7-8). The second part consist of eschatological oracles, subdivided into two sections: the word of the Lord concerning Hadrach (9-11), and the word of the Lord concerning Israel (12-14).⁷ As the literary structure of Zechariah develops throughout the book a new and restored eschatological hope for Israel is established. Zechariah 14 serves as the climax to the entire book by drawing together themes woven throughout the previous 13 chapters.⁸

Verses 1-2

Zechariah 14 begins with Jerusalem being completely destroyed by foreign foes. Martin Luther, the great theologian of the Reformation, wrote two commentaries on the book of Zechariah. When Luther approached the 14th chapter he wrote: "Here, in this chapter, I give up. For I am not sure what the prophet is talking about."⁹ Before interpreting Zechariah 14, the interpreter must be cautious by being open minded. Throughout history this chapter has proved to be quite difficult hermeneutically. There have been various perspectives presented as to when these events have transpired, or if they have yet to transpire.

With these things in mind, the interpreter must move cautiously through the text knowing that there are other alternative perspectives that are equally plausible and valid. Nevertheless, beginning in verse 1, Zechariah proclaims the famously dreaded, "day of the Lord." The verbal form translated "is coming" is a participle that communicates imminent action.¹⁰ This is not to be understood to mean that what Zechariah was proclaiming had to occur within the lives of his original audience. In fact, to limit the things portrayed in this chapter to any one particular time is contrary to the very purpose of the whole.¹¹ This is an important point to mention and to keep in mind while working through the rest of the text.

Zechariah wasted no time expressing the tone of this day. God is depicted the author of the judgement brought against Jerusalem. Zechariah declared that during this time all the people's possessions would be ripped from their midst. This expressed the level of judgement that would fall upon the people. This would not be something they observed from a distance but rather something that would be right before their eyes. According to verse 2, God declared that He would be the one to bring such judgement upon the people. God is the one who will divinely orchestrate this besiegement against Jerusalem. When these things come to pass, they will not take God by surprise for He will be the one who arrays Jerusalem's foes against the holy city.¹² All the nations here represent God's sovereignty over human global nation affairs. "All the nations" seems to act as a hyperbole here in this context, emphasizing the

overwhelming, indeed global, enmity against Zion.¹³ It is at this point that there begins to be a separation between those who align more with discontinuity verse those who align more with continuity. The question is, to whom is this judgement refereeing to ultimately? How far may the interpreter take its symbolisms? Those on the side of continuity would approach the text seeing Jerusalem as a representation of the church. Those who adhere to this perspective see this judgement prophesied in chapter 14 as being progressive throughout the history of the church.¹⁴ This interpretation calls for an expansion of what the original audience would have understood, along with that of the original author himself. Thus, in the scope of progressive revelation, the meaning of the prophecy hasn't changed per say, but rather it has become clearer as history has progressed.

Those on the side of discontinuity see the events within this chapter as only pertaining to the Hebrew Israelites. There are divisions within the realm of dispensationalism as to what these events describe. If one commits to a literal historical-grammatical interpretation, he must still give an account as to when these events happened throughout history. Or he may hold the position stating that they have not occurred yet. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the interpreter is placed in a unique position. He must choose to lean on the side of discontinuity (the events recorded pertain only to Israel) or on the side of continuity (the events recorded allow for symbolism representing the church). This is not to say that one must choose one of the other. As expressed by the various interpretations, this chapter is not that black and white.

The judgement brought against God's people is one that would shake the very fabric of society. All normal life would be halted and irreplaceable due to the damage inflicted. Verse 2 describes a removal of God's people from the land. This language would have been very familiar to Zechariah's audience with Israel having just experienced Babylonian captivity. Throughout history there are numerous accounts of Jerusalem being sacked and destroyed. This stretches throughout Israel's history and throughout the church's history.¹⁵ However, the apocalyptic language, coupled with the universal scope of the prophecies in chapter 14, render any attempt to find a past historical fulfillment to the chapter impossible.¹⁶ It seems that this day demands eschatological fulfillment ultimately culminating in Christ 2nd coming (14:9). Nevertheless, amidst such horrific words of judgement there is a message of grace and mercy. The "remnant" represents God's covenantal promise to His people that he would never cut them off for good.

Verses 3-5

Verse 3 begins by establishing a chronological order of events. After God's judgement there will come His deliverance and grace. The Lord's "going forth" here represents the eternal truth that the Lord is continually going forth to deliver His own when their plight seems desperate.¹⁷ God is introduced as a divine warrior not fighting for Jerusalem and not against her.¹⁸ However, this does not exclude the reference to a literal day of eschatological deliverance in the future.¹⁹

The divide between discontinuity and continuity truly begins to reveal itself here within verse 4. For the dispensationalist, verse 4 refers to Christ's second advent where He will stand atop the Mount of Olives while the world is utter chaos.²⁰ The Covenantalist focus more on the general truth portrayed within the content of the text. That is, that God will continue to provide a way of escape for His own. Anthropomorphic representations of Yahweh's entry into the arena of human history may be found in the prophets, and we need not understand these accounts literally.²¹ Therefore, the symbolism here affirms that God will not allow His people to perish but will enter into time to preserve a remnant. This is the interpretive approach from the perspective of continuity rather than that of discontinuity.

The Lord's return is geographically placed upon the Mount of Olives. It is likely that the prophecy in Acts 1:11-12 bases its prediction on Zechariah 14:4. Consequently, the prophecy in Acts 1 suggest a literal fulfillment of Zechariah 14: upon Christ second return.²² This works in the favor of the literal interpretation of this passage. The context gives no significance to the Mount of Olives other than its location "before Jerusalem."²³ Although, outside of the literary context, this location is a spot of much activity throughout the Scriptures. Jesus is recorded as going to the Mount of Olives on various occasions (Matt 21:1; 24:3; 26:30; Luke 19:37; 21:37).²⁴ In this great day of deliverance the text states that the Mount of Olives will be divided to provide an escape for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (God's people). The geographical shift of the mountains northward and southward creates an awareness of the awesome power, a vivid pictorial representation of the activity of the invisible God in history.²⁵ The moving of earth to provide deliverance and protection expounds upon God's sovereignty over all things.

The valley created will prove to be a miraculous escape route for God's people in this day.²⁶ Men will not run to the valley but through the valley. This demonstrates the truth that salvation will be brought to the people on God's behalf. The location of Azal has raised much speculation throughout history.²⁷ Nevertheless, this place serves as a place of refuge for what it represents. The prophecy continues by explaining the way in which the people will flee from Jerusalem. The fleeing of the people is compared to that of the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah. Amos references this earthquake also (Amos 1:1).²⁸ This reveals the lasting impact that this catastrophic event had within the minds of the Hebrews. The symbolism of the valley represents God's protection and provision for His people. Little does the world know how God's people have been sheltered in valleys of refuge within the upheavals of history.²⁹

The text then states that God will come along with His saints (14:5b). As mentioned in verses 3 and 4, the Lord is already seen as having appeared. Therefore, the repetition serves to emphasize the dramatic point of God's theophany.³⁰ The saints or "holy ones" that will appear with God are His angels.³¹ It is safe to say that in this concluding eschatological time the elect of God will also be among His angels spectating all God's miraculous works. The angels and saints will not be the only ones watching and experiencing these things. All of creation will see the power and glory of the Almighty.

Verses 6-7

The language used in verses 6 and 7 is mysterious and difficult. However mysterious it may seem to be, it is the beginning of the most blissful and peaceful day in history for God's people.³² Whether or not these heavenly signs are seen as literal events or symbolic in nature depends on the individual's hermeneutical presuppositions and commitments. Those who favor a literal interpretation see this passage as describing a sort of twilight zone that is not either day or night.³³ However, those who favor a symbolic interpretation do so because taking the phenomena literally would result in missing the prophetic language in general and of apocalyptic symbolism in particular.³⁴

Verse 6 reveals that during this day there will be no need for the heavenly bodies to produce the lights they once did. The whole rhythm of life divided into evening and day cycles will cease for good.³⁵ The theological point of this verse stresses the completely new order in creation that the Lord's arrival will bring to the land so burdened by sin.³⁶ This new era represents the time in which mankind will then dwell in the eternal presence of God forever. The long and anticipated restoration that Scripture has foreshadowed will come to pass on this day.

Struggling in symbol to convey the nature of this day, the prophet can only leave its effects in the hands of God.³⁷ The prophet declares that these things are known to God and that is enough.

Verses 6 and 7 take the reader back to the creation account found within Genesis 1. If God was able to create the heavenly bodies out of nothing, surely, He is able to remove them from the skies at His own discretion. Revelation 22:5 gives a description very similar to what is found in here in Zechariah 14. A day is described that will have no need for the sun, moon, or stars because God will be the one providing all light. The ushering in of the eternal reign of God is the highlight of this section of Scripture.

Verses 8-9

The 21st century believer is inclined to remember Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman when reading verse 8. There at the well Christ offered the woman living water (John 4:9-14). The prophet here states that living waters will flow throughout Jerusalem on this appointed day. This is similar language that both Ezekiel and Joel used when describing the glorious day of the Lord. The living water represents God's provision that will never end.

This is not water that is drawn from a well nor stored in a cistern.³⁸ These waters represent the everlasting salvation given to God's people that will forever flow and that will never end. The literalist holds to this river prophesied by Zechariah as a literal river that will flow into Jerusalem like never before. Those who take the prophetic language to be symbolic and apocalyptic in nature see this as a strong illustration that exemplifies the glorious salvation presented to God's people when the eschatological kingdom is fully consummated. No matter the interpretive position regarding the prophet's language, the theological hope and truth is still the same: God's people will experience His eternal provision and taste of His glorious grace forevermore when this day comes. Thus, living waters symbolize the spiritual nourishment that vitalizes God's people, sustaining them in their relationship to the inheritance and symbolizing God's provision for this people.³⁹

The living waters are depicted as flowing into the eastern sea and the western sea. The eastern sea represents the Dead Sea. The western sea represents the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁰ These rivers are said to never stop flowing. Zechariah states that in both summer and winter they will flow. This represents the never-ending blessings of God upon His people. When this day comes, the blessings will not be hindered by sin or rebellion as was accustomed in Israel's past. The seas represented the boundaries of the promise land given to Israel (Num 34:12; Deut. 11:24; 34:2).⁴¹ The land has its ultimate function representing the climax of the inheritance, namely, the arrival in the eschatological kingdom of God.⁴² All of the features mentioned thus far supply only the background for this day. The most important part of his day is found within verse 9.⁴³

Verse 9 brings in the consummation of the rule and reign of God on the earth. This is what John spoke of throughout the book of Revelation (21:1-4; 22:3). The earth will be made new and everything within it. God's people will be delivered from the stain and curse of sin forever more. The hymn written by Jim Hill comes to mind when reading about this glorious day. In his hymn *What a Day That Will Be* Jim wrote: "There is coming a day, when no heart aches shall come, no more clouds in the sky, no more tears to dim the eye, all is peace forever more, on that happy golden shore, what a day, glorious day that will be." For Zechariah's audience this prophecy was to give them great assurance and joy in the Lord. For the church today this prophecy should provide even more joy being that we are on the other side of the cross looking back at that which made this eschatological kingdom possible. For Zechariah and his original audience this day was the day that God's rule would be global and universal. On this unparalleled day, every person will finally acknowledge that the Lord, and none other, is indeed God.⁴⁴ God's people will be with Him forever and ever with no end in sight. This passage points back to the great Shema (Deut. 6:4-5). The Shema represented God's relationship to Israel. However, on this day the emphasis is made universal.⁴⁵ On this day every knee will bow down and worship the Lord.

Conclusion

Amidst a world broken by sin and evil, the people of God have a hope that truly sustains. In the day of Zechariah, the Hebrew people were awaiting true deliverance and restoration. It was this prophecy along with many others that filled the hearts of the Jews with anticipation and perseverance. The expectation for God to bring these prophecies to pass in the day of Christ are seen all throughout the gospel accounts. This partially explains why the Jews in Jesus' day did not recognize Him as their Messiah.

The Jews were awaiting the universal and political consummation of this eschatological kingdom promised here in Zechariah 14. The thought of this kingdom being all ready but not yet, consummated through a suffering Messiah, did not fit their expectations. Nevertheless, understanding the effects these prophecies had on the Hebrews eschatology does help to recognize why Jesus did not fit the mold of Messiah in the eyes of the first century Hebrews.

During an age of continuous discomfort and war, Israel was given this word to assure them that God is in control. In the end He will win, and all things will be submitted under Him. Having been placed under continuous submission by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and soon to be the Greeks, it was easy for God's people to lose sight of the promises made toward them. Even though such judgement was brought on them not because of God's inability to protect them, but because of their breaking of the covenant.

For them and for the modern reader this chapter provides assurance and hope for the future. When all things are said and done, all things will be brought together under the name of the Lord God of heaven. The apocalyptic language given through this Scripture gave Israel the opportunity to behold the great future that is to come. The prophet's language enabled them to look into these things as if they were looking through a stained-glass window.⁴⁶ Only a partial glimpse is given, because with human words it is impossible to express the glory of this day. Therefore, Israel was to take heart in this truth which should have caused them to live in a continual state of worship, dependence, and repentance.

Application

The prophecy in Zechariah 14 is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire Old Testament. If the great theologian Martin Luther expressed difficulty in interpreting this passage, then it is fair to assume that one should approach the text with humility. The passage at hand truly places a unique burden on the interpreter for a few reasons. The text almost forces the interpreter to commit to either a literal word for word tangible fulfillment or an apocalyptic symbolic fulfillment.

This passage tests the limits between those of dispensationalism and covenantalism. The covenantalist views the text in light of its apocalyptic nature. Meaning that the covenantalist sees the language used by the prophet as merely hyper symbolic. This does not mean that the covenantalist does not take the text literally, nor does it mean that the covenantalist does not use a historical grammatical interpretive approach. The covenantalist sees these events as simply illustrations used to express spiritual realities that will come to pass when this day does come.

They do not believe that these physical descriptions should be taken literally. They see them as mere attempts to explain and express the glory and divine revelation that will occur on that day. Much could be said about this interpretive approach for the good and bad. The dispensationalist will often times find himself committed to a literal interpretation of the text at hand. However, this would mean that God's future plans do in fact include Israel as a nation. This would entail two separate plans for two groups, the church and Israel. Nevertheless, this interpretive position has its positives and negatives. It

has been my goal to approach the text from both sides. The goal has been to serve the positions along the side of discontinuity and continuity alike. Therefore, if it seems that my hermeneutic has shifted between the systems in an inconsistent fashion it is for this very reason.

This text along with many others in the Old Testament prove to be difficult to interpret at times. Nevertheless, the hope and overall message of the text is the same: God will bring to pass His rule and reign over all things one day (14:9). That day will be unimaginable and glorious for His elect and hopeless for His enemies. This eternal kingdom began at Christ' incarnation in an already but not yet fashion (Mark 1:15). This is why He commanded His apostles to pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done here on earth (Matt. 6:10).

The hope of this eternal kingdom will one day become a literal reality for God's people one day. Therefore, the church today ought to live in a state of thankfulness, security, and joy knowing that this is the future that is in store. Knowing that God has made a way for all men to come into this eternal kingdom is blissful and magnificent. It is God's love and salvation expressed in this prophecy that ought to compel the believer to shout for joy each and every day that he arises from sleep, knowing that regardless of what occurs here and now, there is a much better day drawing near.

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