

BaptistWay Bible Series for March 29: Ten encouraging words

March 16, 2009

In 1968, jazz legend Louis Armstrong recorded “What a Wonderful World.” While Armstrong didn’t have anything close to a smooth voice, it was a hit, most probably for its optimistic lyrics. It’s a song that makes you feel good. Take a look at its first two verses or listen to it [here](#) on YouTube and see if you don’t agree:

“I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom, for me and for you
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

The song represents the kind of idyll we all would like to see. Its positive message is one most of can agree on. We’d all like a perfect world.

A perfect world

Zechariah 8 is God’s vision for a perfect world for Judah. Ten times in chapter 8, God delivers a word of encouragement to the Jews through Zechariah, each time beginning with “Thus says the Lord” (NASB). Through each of these declarations, God shares his plan for the nation of Judah:

God’s plan was to restore Judah so they would worship him faithfully, thus drawing others to share in the salvation of the Lord. It’s a vision of the

world God wants. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. To understand the context of this passage, let's jump back one chapter.

A question answered

Chapter 8 is God's response to a question about fasting posed by a group of men from the town of Bethel to Zechariah. The time is 522 B.C., two years after last week's lesson, ("God's Gracious Offer," Zechariah 1:1-17), two years after Zechariah's "night visions" and the restart of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

Zechariah is one of a number of active prophets during the time after the Jews return from exile in Babylon, and he's also a priest. So the contingent from Bethel asks the priests and prophets, "Do we 'weep and abstain as I have done in the fifth month and abstain, as I have done these many years?'" (Zechariah 7:3).

God's answer is quick and heavy with judgment as delivered through Zechariah. The nation's fasting, God tells the group, was hypocritical, self-serving: "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these 70 years, was it actually for me that you fasted?" he asks (v. 5).

He also reminds them of the need to practice justice in the land and that their previous disobedience brought their defeat and exile upon them.

Ten encouraging words

But with his harsh reminder comes his continuing message, one of encouragement, in chapter 8. Let's look at these 10 encouraging words and attempt a lesson exercise you can attempt as you read the chapter or as a class exercise with your Bible study: Let's paraphrase them in as simple terms as we can in today's language.

- "I love you" (v. 2). God loves Judah to the point of jealousy.

- “I am coming to live with you” (v. 3). After an extended separation brought on by the exile of the Jews and the destruction of God’s holy temple, the rebuilding of the temple would again signify God’s house on earth.
- “I’m going to bless you with numbers” (vv. 4-5). God promises that Judah would again be populated with healthy elders relaxing in streets where children play.
- “I will help you overcome obstacles” (v. 6). God assures them that if the way seems too hard in difficult times for the people, it will not be difficult for the Lord.
- “I’m going to gather my family together again” (vv. 7-8). In sharing this prophecy, God told the group he would gather the exiled Jews from far distances and reunite them under their covenant relationship.
- “We’re going to finish the temple and live in peace and dignity” (vv. 9-13). By working hard and completing the temple with God’s help, the people would bring peace and prosperity to the land, a condition that had not existed prior to the rebuilding efforts.
- “I will bless you if you are obedient” (vv. 14-17). These verses are a reminder of the blessings to an obedient people. What is the blessing promised? Peace. And what does God ask of them? To live in truth and let it be a guiding force in their lives.
- “I will replace fasts with feasts” (vv. 18-19). Months of fasting, abstinence and mourning were all symbolic of penitence for sins. God promises that with the renewal of this covenant and a return of the people to living it, the need for fasting will be replaced with celebration and joy.
- “Jerusalem will be a light for God for all peoples of the world” (vv. 20-22). By returning to the Lord’s will and worship, Judah would attract people

from other nations–Gentiles–to worship God in Jerusalem.

- “You (individual Jews) will be a light for God for all peoples of the world” (v. 23). While verses 20-22 seem to indicate a corporate appeal, verse 23 seems to point to the individual Jew as representatives of their faith and a force to lead non-believers to the Lord.

While these are paraphrased in today’s language, each of these 10 encouragements represent God’s word to his people and form a blueprint for the Jews of that day. Are they also words for today’s Christian? Are they words for you to live by?

Questions for thought

- One of the chief themes of chapter 8 (as well as chapter 7) is the need for believers to practice truth and justice. What are ways we can do this daily?
- Look at verse 23 again. While it seems to speak to individual Jews about the importance of living his or her faith, could it also be Messianic in tone? Could the one Jew represent Christ?
- Look at each of these 10 encouraging words again. How does God share these encouraging words to modern-day Christians?
- The Bible is full of words of encouragement. Look at this [video clip](#) from Tangle.com, a Christian media and social-networking site for a few. Can you name other words of encouragement from God’s word?