

Explore: A refined people

April 3, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 19 focuses on Zechariah 13:1-9.*

A.W. Tozer helps us consider the nature of God in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. He writes: “Left to ourselves, we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. ... We want a God we can in some measure control.”

Tozer appears to be familiar with Zechariah’s uncontrollable God—a God who is the subject of life and salvation rather than a mere object. Consequently, we can affirm if a person has seen Jesus, then he or she has seen the Father (John 14:9). Life ought to be ordered accordingly. A person must come to Jesus by faith in order to receive forgiveness and cleansing of sin.

Zechariah pointed directly to Jesus, even though he ministered in the sixth century B.C. This passage deals with the nature of God and points forward to the coming Christ. We find God cannot be controlled or manipulated by humankind. This true God wills people to be saved from sin and death. Zechariah crafted his preaching in order to encourage people during a tumultuous time of change. This lesson explores Zechariah’s theology and focuses on three images he utilized in communicating God’s truth to a people who desperately needed hope.

The fountain that cleanses (13:1-6)

Notice Zechariah began the chapter with three “on that day” formulas. Zechariah used the phrase at least seven other times in chapters 12 and 14. Obviously, Zechariah was concerned at this point with both the immediate and long-term future of God’s people. We can give definition to this concern by using the term “eschatology,” or the theology of last things. A person’s

eschatology should be informed by a biblical view of God's nature. Consider Zechariah's view as we study two points of his eschatology in these verses.

First, God does and will deal with human sin. We serve a God both sovereign and graceful concerning our sin. God has the final word regarding our offenses. Zechariah consequently pictures a fountain opened in Jerusalem so believers can receive cleansing from sin and idolatry. Notice the cleansing comes from water and not by animal sacrifice. Could this be a reference to the fountain "filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins?" Notice also the fountain is available to people beyond just the house of David. God is inclusive in his nature and will.

Second, God shows great concern for idolatry and will eradicate false prophecy. In the passage, God promises to banish the names of idols, false prophets and the spirit of impurity. If God removes the names of idols, then he obviously renders the idols useless and void of influence. What a blessing it is to anticipate a time when we will forget the names of all idols in deference to Yahweh.

We also may look forward to a time when God removes all prophets who either speak for idols or speak falsely for God and thereby take his name in vain. It is usually the latter group with whom we find ourselves greatly confused even today. We ought to consider seriously any person who claims to speak for God on a particular issue, even if the issue appears trivial or ordinary. Keep in mind God issues a death penalty for false prophets in this passage.

The strike that frees (13:7)

Zechariah shifted his focus at this point by utilizing the poetic, and Zechariah even returns to the shepherding imagery he used in chapter 11. This time, however, the image of the shepherd was slightly different. Previously, it had been used in reference to a wicked ruler. God now

referred to the shepherd as “the man who is close to me.”

The reference here has been the subject of considerable debate in scholarly circles, and many favor an interpretation that equates the Messiah to the shepherd. “The man who is close to me” suggests the shepherd is on equal footing with Yahweh. If such is the case, then a mortal blow upon the shepherd would “scatter the sheep” and execute God’s judgment for sin.

The fire that refines (13:8-9)

Zechariah subsequently prophesied only a handful of the scattered population would remain as a godly remnant. This remnant would have to endure refinement, or trials. Zechariah’s original Jewish audience may have understood his language to provide encouragement and hope in the face of Babylon’s incredible wickedness. Those who were deported by Nebuchadnezzar and his henchmen could survive and find hope if they remained faithful to Yahweh.

In contemporary times, believers still endure trials by fire, so to speak. Consider the current waves of violence against Christians in the Middle East and in Europe. We often cannot fathom the reasons behind such violence other than our knowledge of the demonic, yet the gates of hell have yet to prevail against the church.

Our Good Shepherd was indeed “wounded for our transgressions,” but we have salvation by grace through faith in him. Accordingly, we can endure the refining fires of devoted and truly pious Christian living. The second century pastor, Tertullian, perhaps said it best: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”