

We have come to the penultimate book of the Old Testament. (I love using that word.) It means Zechariah is the “next to the last” book of prophecy (occurring immediately before the last one) in the series of twelve Minor Prophets that make up the concluding chapters of the Old Testament. Together with Haggai and Malachi it belongs to a group of prophecies delivered after the exile.

Zechariah is one of the most highly messianic books of the Bible. In order to encourage his people, the Lord looks beyond their immediate circumstances to the time when all God's enemies will be vanquished, all his purposes fulfilled and the whole earth will acknowledge his rightful rule as King. By “messianic” I mean it points to the coming of the “Anointed One,” the Christ (Greek) or Messiah (Hebrew), promised by God through the prophets.

To give you a few examples of Zechariah's messianic message, he predicted the Messiah's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (9:9; Matthew 21:5), his betrayal for thirty pieces of silver (11:12-13; Matthew 26:14-16, 27:1-10), the desertion of his followers (13:7; Matthew 26:31), the fact that the Messiah would be pierced (12:10; John 19:37) and his glorious return to the Mount of Olives (14:4; Acts 1:9-11). The book of Zechariah is quoted from or alluded to in the New Testament *seventy-one times*, and apart from the prophecy of Ezekiel had the greatest influence on the book of Revelation.

As we read Zechariah, the Lord encourages us to complete whatever tasks he has given to us and to see them from his eternal perspective. When God calls us to complete a task, we know we should be faithful and diligent until it is accomplished. But sometimes we grow tired or discouraged, like the ancient Israelites did. Obstacles block our path; opponents mock us, and over time we are tempted to give up. During such times, we need a fresh word from the Lord. He gently rebukes us, then offers us strong encouragement and genuine hope. Most of all, he gives us a renewed vision of how our daily tasks fit into his broader plans and purposes for this world.

If you have grown weary doing God's will, then the book of Zechariah is for you. Its message will refresh and strengthen you. It was written to the 50,000 or so Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. God had called them to rebuild the Temple, and initially they responded with great energy and zeal. But as they faced one problem after another, their zeal turned to apathy and the work on the Temple came to a halt. Then God sent the prophet Zechariah (whose name means “The Lord remembers”) to turn the people back to the Lord and to the task they needed to complete. It required hopeful determination...lots and lots of determination.

In 1983, Australia hosted its ultramarathon, a 573.7 mile foot race from Sydney to Melbourne. This is a race that takes days to run, and professionals from all over the world came to participate. Shortly before the race began, a 61-year-old farmer named Cliff Young, wearing overalls and goulashes over his boots, walked up to the registration table and requested a number to enter the race. The people at the registration table thought it was a joke—that somebody was setting them up—so they laughed. But Cliff Young said, “No, I'd really like to run.” So they gave him a number and pinned it on his old overalls.

Cliff Young walked over to the start of the race. All the other professional runners, who were decked out in all their running regalia, looked at him like he was crazy. The crowd snickered. They laughed even more when the gun went off and the race began, because all those professional runners had sculpted

bodies and beautiful strides, but not Cliff Young. He didn't even run like a runner. Cliff Young ran with an awkward, goofy-looking shuffle. All through the crowd people were laughing, and finally, someone called out, "Get that old fool off the track!"

Five days, 14 hours, and four minutes later, at 1:25 in the morning, Cliff Young shuffled across the finish line of the 573.7 mile ultramarathon. He had won the race. And he didn't win by a matter of minutes or even an hour or two. The second place runner was nine hours and 56 minutes behind him. Cliff Young had set a new world record for the ultramarathon. The press mobbed him wondering what kind of special running shoes he must have had, and they rummaged through his backpack wondering what he'd survived on—he'd lived primarily on pumpkin seeds and water. What was the secret to his success? Cliff Young had shuffled his way to victory without ever sleeping. The other runners would run for 18 hours straight, and then stop and sleep for three or four hours. He endured running five days, 14 hours, and four minutes at the age of 61.

I love that story because on my last birthday I reached the age of (you guessed it) 61. God isn't finished with me yet. If you want to know how you should respond to the messianic prophecy of Zechariah, realize that God isn't finished with you yet. As I spoke with the children earlier, part of the answer to our discouragement or weariness is found in the story of Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem that, by the way, Zechariah foretold over 500 years before it happened. Each year in the month of November we are reminded to step away from the flurry of activity that characterizes our lives to do one simple thing that God asks. Give thanks.

■ We should be thankful that Jesus is our King—a King riding on a donkey and hailed with palm branches.

■ And we should be thankful that Jesus, our Lord and King was willing to suffer and die for us.

■ It's right for us to feel happy because Jesus deserves our praise. And it's okay for us to feel sad because Jesus did suffer and die. As long as over and above it all, we feel THANKFUL. Because Jesus did what he did for all of us because he loves us.

■ So, thank you, Jesus. Thank you, King of all creation. And thank you Zechariah for your prophecy.

I read something recently about two-time Academy Award-winning actor Denzel Washington who is best known for his roles in *Glory*, *The Preacher's Wife*, *Remember the Titans*, and *Training Day*. When he has spoken at recent events the Hollywood A-lister has sounded more like a pastor. Washington has publicly stated that he reads his Bible every day and that he strives to consistently "get up and speak of what God has done for him."

At a church banquet last November he urged his listeners to live in a constant attitude of gratitude for God's goodness: "Give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers way under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there, say "thank you." A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere" (Jeannie Law, *Denzel Washington: God Has 'Faith in Me,'* from the Christian Post (11-12-15).

With that same spirit of thanksgiving, Eugene Peterson introduces this book of a Minor Prophet and helps to sum up his message. Peterson says, “Zechariah shared with his contemporary Haggai the prophetic task of getting the people of Judah to rebuild their ruined Temple. Their preaching pulled the people out of self-preoccupation and got them working together as a people of God. There was a job to do, and the two prophets teamed up to make sure it got done.

But Zechariah did more than that. For the people were faced with more than a ruined Temple and city. Their self-identity as the people of God was in ruins. For a century they had been knocked around by the world powers, kicked and mocked, used and abused. This once-proud people, their glorious sacred history starred with the names of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, and Isaiah, had been treated with contempt for so long that they were in danger of losing all connection with that past, losing their magnificent identity as God’s people.

Zechariah was a major factor in recovering the magnificence from the ruins of a degrading exile. Zechariah reinvigorated their imaginations with his visions and messages. But that isn’t the end of it. Zechariah’s enigmatic visions...and his poetically charged messages are at work still, like time capsules in the lives of God’s people, continuing to release insight and hope and clarity for the people whom God is using to work out his purposes [today]...”

Difficult times do not last forever, nor do those who try to defeat us always have the upper hand. Israel had been defeated and humiliated by her enemies. However, in Zechariah 9 the Lord promises to conquer those who had conquered Israel and to restore peace to those troubled by war. I think the high point of Zechariah’s description of the Lord’s coming is in verse 16: “*The LORD their God will save his people on that day as a shepherd saves his flock. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown.*”

Imagine you’re strolling down the sidewalk and your eye catches a sparkle of something that appears to be a diamond. How are you to know if it’s a real diamond? Easy decision for me—I’d take it directly to my jeweler friend, Doug Annibale. But I already know that a fake diamond will easily scratch, chip or break. Diamonds are the hardest natural material known to man and the most brilliant. Sandpaper cannot damage the surface of a real diamond, only another diamond can cut a diamond. Why do diamonds sparkle? According to physics, the brilliant sparkle of a diamond occurs from refraction and the total internal reflection of light. The precisely cut surfaces of a diamond refract or redirect incoming light until it is reflected back out of the facets of the diamond to our eyes.

Zechariah 9 looks beyond Israel’s immediate future to the coming of the One who would be the messianic King. When his light shines into our lives, we too begin to sparkle, “*like jewels in a crown.*” When we are in the midst of difficult times or have experienced defeat, Zechariah assures us that the Lord’s presence and his promises give us genuine hope, so we can sparkle.

The One who is Lord of all wants to extend his lordship to every area of life. I’m convinced that the whole prophecy of Zechariah is best received and appreciated with two simple words that represent the theme of this season of the year: *Thank you.*

Let us thank the Lord for his wonderful promises and for his infinite love. Thanks be to God! Hallelujah! Amen.