

Israel ... will she survive?

That's the six million dollar question! Is there a future for the nation of Israel? Do the Jewish people have a role to play in God's prophetic agenda? For them, and the Land, is the writing on the wall? Where do they fit in God's plan for the Middle East? Or, perhaps, has God finished with them?

Right now, it seems to me that Israel is caught in the eye of the storm - in the last year, for obvious reasons, she has never been out of the news, the front page headlines are quite sensational. Let me fill in some of the blanks for you ...

- from the east comes the very real threat of Iran's long range missiles - Israel felt the force of them a few weeks back; if we believe all that we read in the papers, those same missiles could soon be tipped with nuclear warheads
- to the south, the temperature has risen a few degrees as the Egyptian government threatens to cancel the 1979 peace treaty with Israel - so far as some of their hardliners are concerned, it's not worth the papyrus it is written on
- in the north, it is no secret that Hezbollah had accumulated more than 200,000 rockets - with Israel's recent incursion into Lebanon there's no doubt they have left Hezbollah considerably weakened - now, there's a ceasefire, we'll see what happens next ... and, in Gaza, which is like a bomb site, marked by dereliction and sheer

Zechariah 12-14

devastation, it's a case of déjà vu as what's left of Hamas continues to make its presence felt in the region ... a popular slogan affirms their dogma, when it says that: 'Gaza will never be defeated, but Israel will be deleted.'

- all over the world, Arab hackers are targeting Israel's computer systems - a short while back, one of Israel's top generals referred to this sinister turn of events as "cyber terrorism"

The facts are scary, the reality is chilling, the storm clouds are gathering ... the end may be near, but the last dice has not yet been thrown. Hence the mega important question: will Israel survive?

If you listen to some of the siren voices in the region, all the alarm bells are ringing - the red lights are flashing - for example, as we know only too well, Hamas is totally committed to the destruction of the modern state of Israel. That fact is etched in granite in their charter. To them, the demise of Israel is non-negotiable.

Travel a few miles to the east to Iran - listen to the war-mongering from a former president ... he said in a well documented speech, and I quote: "Israel must be wiped off the map!" I can assure you, nothing was lost in translation - he meant every word that he said. For he went on to say that "the Jewish state was a shrinking corpse that will soon disappear."

Recently, to add fuel to the fire, the supreme leader of Iran, the man who calls the shots, the Ayatollah, referred to "the cancerous tumour of Israel" - that's bad enough, then he raised the stakes when he went on to affirm his total determination to confront it and defeat it.

OK, on a human level, it all sounds rather bleak - it's ominous - there are inky black days ahead ... that's why I believe we need to get back to the Bible, back to the timeless truth of the Word of God ... like Jeremiah, we ask the question: "Is there a word from the Lord?"

And, thankfully, there is ... you see, that's where the message of Zechariah lifts the gloom - he draws back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of the eternal plan of God ... that plan can never be thwarted by man or nation.

The old preacher arrived on the scene after the exile ... he declared in 2:8 that "whoever touches Israel touches the apple of God's eye." The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the covenant, is saying: "You touch Israel, you will live to regret it! Sooner or later, you will get your comeuppance. You will pay a heavy price for messing around with my people and my Land." It seems to me that history bears that out!

When we dig deeper into the prophecy of Zechariah, we discover just how significant his message is ... here's a man who knows a thing or two about dark and difficult days - he has lived through them; he's a man who has felt the pain of trauma and trouble - he knows all about the

best of times and the worst of times. That's why God raised him up to rally the nation - the big question is, how did he do it?

Read the book ... it's a good read - an hour at the very most will do it ... it's a series of electrifying prophecies that make the pulse race and the heart beat faster. He sees the big picture for he sees the nation of Israel in an international context, a global context - his comments are staggering, his predictions are awesome - he gives us a remarkable insight into the end times!

Let me give you a quick summary of the book - there are 3 main points - I call it the 3 R's of Redemption. The first six chapters focus on God's programme of redemption - it is something that has been revealed.

Then, in the centre section from chapters 7-11, that same programme of redemption is rejected - the King has come and they crucified him ... John says, he came unto his own and they gave him the cold shoulder.

The final section, chapters 12-14, tell us that this programme of redemption, once revealed, then rejected, will ultimately be received!

Ever wondered, why is that? Well, God's plan of redemption is not packaged as a kind of political ideology ... it's not a philosophy that we pursue ... rather, it finds its focus and fulfilment in a Person whom we follow and trust - the spotlight is on one man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yeshua! The Saviour of the world. That's why the message reaches a glorious finale in 14:9, when the

prophet looks forward to a day when "the Lord will be king over all the earth."

Will Israel survive? It would be fairly easy for me to answer that vital question from a political perspective ... or even from a military perspective ... this evening I want to answer it from a biblical perspective. For me, as a Bible teacher, that is all that matters - it's not what man says, it's what God says!

Here, then, are 7 things you've always wanted to know about Israel ... seven pictures on the canvas of Scripture that show us the heart of God for his covenant people!

The first picture is found in 13:7 where we come across the phrase: "strike the shepherd."

What's he talking about there? Well, that's a unique reference to Calvary! The prophet was looking forward 500 years to the hour when the Lord Jesus would give his life as a ransom for many. It can't be anything else. How do I know? Simple answer, Jesus used it when he talked about his own death in the gospel of Matthew (26:31).

He saw himself as the Good Shepherd - the one who would lay down his life for all those sheep who had gone astray - people like you and me; on that centre cross, the Shepherd of Israel became the Passover Lamb - the one who died for the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

I love the way Zechariah describes him here in verse 7 ... it's a threefold cord: one, he is spoken of as "my Shepherd" - that speaks of relationship,

something based on covenant love. It reminds me of the sweet psalmist of Israel, David, the shepherd king - he wrote in Psalm 23 that "the Lord is my Shepherd" ... many people know the psalm, thank God, we know the Shepherd.

Two, he also speaks of "the man" - so the Shepherd is a man ... that reminds me of the humanity of Jesus. He was a man, flesh and blood, yet without sin! Three, he goes on to say, "the man who is close to me" - the thought here is of someone who is my equal, my fellow, my nearest of kin ... a powerful word to affirm the deity of Jesus.

See the picture - the Shepherd is man and God combined! Yes, on the cross, it was God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. In a nutshell, that is the gospel according to Zechariah. The sword represents divine justice dealing with the question of sin. And it is also portrayed as an act of God. It was something he had to do - if there are any doubts in your mind, read Isaiah 53.

The poet expressed it thus: "Jehovah bade his sword awake, O Christ, it woke 'against thee; thy blood, the flaming blade must slake, thy heart its sheath must be."

The second picture is also found in verse 7, on the next line, "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."

Well, isn't that just what happened ... it began on the evening of his betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane. And, again, it was evident on that dark grey, lonely hillside of Calvary - in human

terms, when he needed them most, you couldn't find them! They'd done a runner! You couldn't see them for dust. But that was only a shadow of things to come ...

A number of years later we come to AD70 and the fall of Jerusalem, and later in AD135 when the Romans put down the Bar Kokhba revolt - that's when the Jewish people were scattered all over the place. It's often referred to as the Diaspora. Read through the book of Acts and they are everywhere. It didn't matter where Paul went to preach - he always met Jewish people. To the north and south, east and west, there they are! For centuries, the Jewish people wandered - a people without a land. Homeless. Stateless. Aliens in foreign countries. Refugees. Asylum seekers (yes, that's right - read the opening verses in 1 Peter, for that's how he described them).

Despite being scattered to the four winds of the earth, the Jewish people still retained their sense of identity. Sure, they lived in different cultures, and in a host of different regions, but they were never assimilated. They were always Jews - so we have American Jews, Russian Jews, or whatever. They survived even when, humanly speaking, the odds were stacked against them. That's amazing. In fact, it's more than amazing - its miraculous! We can declare today with real conviction that the history of Israel is a miracle, even as Israel is a miracle of history. It can't be explained. Neither can it be explained away. One name says it all,

God! Behind her is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - the God of the patriarchs, the God who doeth wonders, the God who specialises in things that are impossible.

If you have any lingering doubts about the ability of God, or even the existence of God, the Jewish nation and the Jewish people clearly indicate that there is a God in heaven ...

The third picture is found in the final few words of verse 7, where we read: "strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones."

Zechariah focuses now on the character of God ... the cameo we have here is that of a turned hand. A beautiful representation of the grace of God, the tenderness and compassion of God, even the abundant mercy of God. You see, and look at my hand for a moment - the hand that drove them out is the same hand that will turn and draw them back! Wonderful, isn't it!

You folks know your history - down through the centuries the Jewish people have been hunted and hounded. Tidal waves of anti-Semitism have swept across the nations (even today these tsunamis can be felt in different parts) ... it has almost doubled in the last year, since 7 October. There have been the pogroms, the ghettos, the gas chambers, the concentration camps, the Holocaust - much of this still in living memory. Then on 14 May 1948 - and some of you will remember this - on a political level, a nation was born in a day! 76 years ago! There was a land

without a people, there was a people without a land ... and, in the providence of a sovereign God, the two came together, like a hand fitting into a glove.

They were back in the Land which God had given to them as far back as Genesis 12 ... right now, in your lifetime and mine, many Jewish people are still wending their way back home. A nation regathered. Just like the prophets said it would be. This is a miracle unfolding before our eyes - God is working his purposes out.

The middle picture, number four, is seen further down the chapter in verse 9, where we read: "This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'"

I think this is nothing short of sensational ... this verse is one of the key verses in all of the Old Testament - it's a verse of amazing contrasts: it speaks of tribulation and triumph, of profound sorrow and ecstatic hope - it hits a high note when the chilled relationship between God and his people is now restored and renewed. That's why grace is so amazing!

It seems to me that this verse propels us into the future - it's a reference to the time of Jacob's trouble, as Jeremiah labelled it; it slots into the time frame of what is called, Daniel's seventieth week - read all about it at the end of Daniel 9 in verses 24-27.

This is all scheduled to happen during the period of Great Tribulation here on earth - so many dear people will perish, a significant number will be purged - here we are reminded of a remnant that will remain.

These days are scarily frightening - it's worth noting, the church will not be here, she will be with the Lord for the trumpet will have sounded - we often call that event the rapture of the church (Paul writes of it in 1 Thessalonians 4).

As soon as the church is up and away, and the Antichrist is revealed, it's a case of all hell being let loose in the world, days when hordes of demons will rape the earth, days when Satan is on the run - you can read all about in the long centre section of the book of Revelation.

Many of the OT prophets spoke of it - men like Joel and Amos ... days of abject gloom, it is hailed as the "terrible day of the Lord."

The fact is, that's when God is working behind the scenes - the old truth that weeping will endure for a night but joy comes in the morning is so appropriate at this point in her history. That's the message of Zechariah 12 ... when Jesus returns to the earth the hearts of Jewish people will be opened as they see him (12:10).

It all begins with a move of the Holy Spirit in conviction and it ends with them calling on the name of the Lord - once their eyes are opened and they recognise him as the One whom they pierced, they will mourn as one mourns when losing an only son - it's compared to the national

outpouring of grief resulting from the mortal wounding of godly King Josiah at Hadad Rimmon. Such grief, such deep sorrow, such an awareness of sin - it's nationwide repentance, yet there's something individual about it too for each person mourns alone. He deals with us one-to-one!

Thank God, in that day, we read in 13:1, that "a fountain is opened for sin and uncleanness." I love that for it shows the power of the blood of Jesus to cleanse all sinners, no matter who they are or where they're from! The hymn writer tells us, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins ..." This is it! Jesus saves! Sure, he does. That's the day when Paul's prayer for the salvation of Jewish people in Romans 10:1 will be answered ... for we read that "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). You see, God's delays are not his denials.

To me, that's the icing on the cake - they will turn to him and say with love and affection, "the Lord is our God" ... he will look at them and say with a smile on his face, "and you are my people." Yes, that's what reconciliation is all about!

Picture five is over the page in 14:2, where we read: "I will gather all nations to Jerusalem to fight against it ..."

It's fairly obvious what the preacher is talking about here - Armageddon. The mastermind behind it all is the living God himself. He puts it in the hearts of all those world leaders to make a beeline for the Land - they come down from the north, up from the south, across from the east

and west - they converge on the land with one aim in view - they want to teach the Jewish people a lesson they will never forget!

The sabres are rattling ... the big guns are blazing ... it would seem that Israel is on the losing side, that the invading armies are having a heyday ... the scent of victory is in their nostrils ... THEN when all seems lost, read verse 3: "Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle" ... hey, that's divine intervention, and not for the first time. Jesus steps into the theatre of war when he returns in power and great glory.

That's when he will deal with the nations of Planet Earth, his enemies will be his footstool - don't forget, God is interested in the underdog! Once again, the hills and valleys of Israel will be the graveyard for the nations - there, they will meet their Waterloo!

In her hour of greatest need, in her moment of desperate plight, the God of the covenant will rally to her side - he is the champion of her cause ... that's why the Armageddon campaign is referred to by John as "the battle of the great day of God Almighty." That last battle is won by a word. Yes, there are dark days ahead, but the battle is the Lord's and victory is secure.

The penultimate picture, number six, is seen in 14:4, where we read: "On that day his feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives."

What a day that will be ... what a sight to see! The king is coming and he's on a white stallion -

touchdown is the Mount of Olives, to the east of the golden city of Jerusalem. Certain momentous changes will take place at that point in time - the mountain will split, a valley will emerge - a way of escape for those on the run. This ties in with the seventh bowl judgment in Revelation 16:18-19.

That's when Jesus will be recognised as the King of kings, Lord of lords, and Prince of princes - a royal visit like no other. Think of the magnificence of the occasion, the majesty of those special moments ... but, look again, he's not on his own.

We read in verse 5 that "his holy ones" are with him - that begs the question, who are they? They are the special agents at his side, it's the holy angels ... and it's the church, every believer, we are there! Beside and behind him as the armies of heaven.

This is the hour that Paul had in mind when he talked about Jesus "being admired and glorified in his saints" (2 Thess. 1).

Ah, we read all about it in Philippians 2; this is when every eye shall see him, when every knee shall bow before him, and when every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. See how all these great prophetic truths tie in at the end of time - they find their fulfilment in Him.

For Israel, in her darkest hour, the Bright and Morning Star has shone ... the Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in his wings ... my friend, God has not forgotten his ancient people, nor has he failed them, or forsaken them. To the contrary, he has a plan ...

and all these events are happening in his time and going according to his schedule.

Number seven is the final picture and we see it in verse 9, where we read: "And the Lord will be king over the whole earth."

This is simply glorious ... the Lord rules and reigns on Planet Earth. He sits on the throne of his father David in the city of the great king. John reminds us in the Apocalypse that is when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of his dear Son. Those are days of peace and prosperity, days when the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea ... days of heaven on earth ... it's the golden age of the millennium - 1,000 years of Jesus rule!

Imagine it ... better still, you can read all about it in the Psalms and in the book of Isaiah. This is amazing ... there will be phenomenal changes in every realm - the desert will bloom like the rose, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, men will learn the art of war no more, a man will be young even when he's one hundred years of age ...

Listen to this, Jerusalem will be the capital city of the world, the temple will be rebuilt ... all of this, and so much more ... it promises to be an era of unparalleled spiritual blessing for the Lord God is in the midst - he is seen at the end of the book of Ezekiel as one who is Jehovah Shammah, whose name means, 'the Lord is there.'

Why is it so incredible? Because, in the words of the hymn penned by Isaac Watts, "blessing abounds where'er he reigns."

The question was, Will Israel survive? I hope you've got the answer - it's an emphatic, resounding YES! No doubt, at all. Israel is God's ticking clock. We have scanned her chequered past, we have caught a glimpse of what's going on right now and, by faith, we have looked into the future ...

one day, says the prophet, Jerusalem "will be secure" (14:11) - there and then, the purposes of God will be brought to fruition. So we read up the page in verse 9, "on that day, there will be one Lord, and his name the only name."

Let me say this in closing: God has not ditched his covenant people, he has not duped them, he has not deserted them. Soon, and it may be sooner than we realise, he will do what he said he would do ... for he is a God of unimpeachable integrity, a God of truth, a God who can be trusted at all times. His track record is second to none.

In the short term, the future of Israel is as gloomy as a grey leaden sky - however, in the long term, her future is bright like a cloudless sky! Because God is God, she will survive!