

Zechariah 13

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[0 : 00] It's not been an easy year for us, has it, in the Christian church in 2013. I think the one big issue that has probably occupied our thoughts and prayers more than anything else has been the same-sex marriage thing.

I cannot think, really, that there's been any one matter that has so dominated our praying as that particular issue. And we felt right across this Christian spectrum, so much prayer had gone up about that matter.

And we'd hoped that God would intervene. And he doesn't seem to have done so, at least not in any manner that we've been able to ascertain.

And now it's in law. And next year, the first such marriage ceremony will take place. And I predict that it won't be too very long after that before the first test case is brought against some church that wants to stand on principle.

And that's what the future might hold for us. And along with that, during the course of the year, perhaps some lesser issues, but no less important.

[1 : 21] A number of our brothers and sisters have found that the law will not support them in their desire to express their Christian witness. And so we feel that our liberties to proclaim the gospel are being eroded.

And it seems that the enemies of God are ranged against us. And it's been that sort of a year. And so the beginning of 2014, we might look with some apprehension to what the future might hold for us.

Now, I know that you've had good news today. And I know that you'll be feeling very upbeat. And I'm just so delighted and just so grateful that I've been here on this day when you've made this decision and a positive response.

And you must be just praising God for that. And that's tremendous. So it may be then that you will think, well, this preacher trying to discourage us with regard to what the future might hold is a bit off track.

I'm thinking across the whole of the Christian church. And who knows what challenges we're going to face in the future.

[2 : 48] And how much more of what we hold dear and precious is assailed by the enemies of the gospel.

And so it just seems to me that we stand in need of comfort. And we stand in need of confidence as we face a new year.

And I want to suggest to you that both those two things are to be found in the chapter that was read to us, Zechariah chapter 13. This is not by any means the easiest chapter in the word of God.

And Brother Graham made reference to his prayer to its mysteries. And if you think I'm going to explain all its mysteries to you this evening, I think you'll need to think again. I don't want to do that.

I don't intend to do that. I don't feel competent to do that. I just want to encourage the people of God, myself and yourselves.

[3 : 54] I just want to derive from it both the confidence that we stand in need of and the comfort in God's word that will mean so much to us.

Whatever the future holds. Whatever challenges there are to wrestle with. Confidence and comfort. I say it's not an easy chapter. And in broadest terms, it is looking forward, I suppose, to a day of cleansing.

Verse 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 1. 2. 2. 2. 2. 2. 3. 3. 3. 3. 2. 3.

4. There's a hint of the gospel there. They used to sing like I did. I know a fount where sins are washed away. I know a place where night is turned to day.

Burdens are lifted. Blind eyes made to see. There's a wonder-working power in the blood of Calvary. Yeah, the gospel's there, thankfully. But it's a double-edged reference to the gospel because it's followed then by denunciations of idolatry amongst the Lord's people and a rooting out of those who are false prophets.

[5 : 20] And it's fairly direct and threatening as to what God's intentions are, the cleansing that he's talking about in this fount which is going to be opened.

It's a double-edged reference to the gospel message. And that makes it a wee bit of a difficult chapter to come to terms with.

And if we're looking for the gospel in it and some have found it, I think, in an unlikely place. Some have looked, for example, at verse 6.

Someone asks him, what are these wounds on your body? He'll answer the wounds I was given at the house of my friends. Some have seen that as a reference to the crucifixion. But if that's the case, it's lifted entirely out of context.

And it seems to me that God's word here plainly directs to false prophets, as you might know. It was their custom very often to mutilate themselves in the worship of their gods.

[6 : 30] It's what happened on Mount Carmel. And in context, it's not a reference to the cross. It's a reference to God's judgment against those who peddle untruth amongst the people of God.

So there's judgment there, even whilst we think of the fount that is opened. There's a judgment there. A cleansing process is not always a pleasant process.

And it's very clear in that respect. And we don't need to find Calvary there in that sixth verse, the wounds in the body of this false prophet, because we can come to Calvary in a much more direct fashion.

And I promise you, that's what we will do. So it's a difficult chapter, but it concludes. It concludes with a message of the deliverance of God's faithful people and with a reaffirmation of a covenant-keeping God.

So the closing words of verse 9, they will call on my name and I will answer them and I will say, they are my people and they will say, the Lord is our God.

[7 : 53] That's where I want to direct your thoughts. We'll move away from the mysteries of the chapter and just concentrate on that wonderful testimony from the lips of Almighty God himself towards those who are faithful to him, whom he has refined through their afflictions and their tribulations and brought them through to renew their confidence in him and to derive their comfort from him.

Confidence. Of course, the prophet Zechariah is exercising a ministry to a very small and dispirited group of the Lord's people.

They have returned from Babylon after the captivity with high expectations and there was this project to rebuild the temple to centralize again the worship of God in that city of David.

But little progress had been made sadly. There was opposition from without. There was a lack of zeal from within. And here, maybe 16, 20 years later after that return, still the temple remains unfinished.

And so there is a sense of discouragement amongst God's people. And we may easily see some parallels to that situation to our own.

[9 : 34] We are small, aren't we? We have limited influence. Our enemies seem to be so strong. We are under pressure. Zechariah. And so we can perhaps identify with the way these people were feeling as Zechariah brings God's word to them.

And they need, as we need, an injection of confidence. And so God says, they are my people.

They are my people. Ultimately, of course, it's the sovereignty of God which is the issue here.

Now there's a doctrine to which we pay a great deal of attention and lip service sometimes. We hold it as a fundamental truth of the gospel we believe.

The faith has been delivered to us. God is sovereign in all his ways, in supreme control of the universe he created and the affairs of men and above all, the future prospects of his church.

[10 : 48] God is sovereign. That's where we stand. And it's easy to make that affirmation. And it's easy to proclaim that statement except that when things are not going quite according to plan, not as we might have expected them to turn out, it's not quite so easy to really base our confidence in the truth that God is sovereign.

He is in control. God is still on the throne. Or is he? But sometimes it doesn't feel like that. Perhaps in our own individual lives, in the life of our churches, is God still on the throne?

And it doesn't look very promising, does it? Even in the passage we've got because this almighty God, this sovereign God, has declared that the shepherd will be struck and the sheep will be scattered.

And if that's part of the sovereign will of God, it's not a very encouraging aspect of God's dealings with us.

Is this God on behalf of his people? But, thankfully, there is a New Testament application. And we need to turn to that because otherwise we could be left disheartened by that statement that God is going to strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

[12 : 25] And we find that in Matthew's Gospel, and you will need to turn to this because it's critical in our understanding of where we're going to come with regard to what we believe about the sovereignty of God despite all appearances to the contrary.

Matthew chapter 26, verse 31. Then Jesus told them, This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.

But, after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. You see how Jesus relates those words in Zechariah to himself.

He is the shepherd who is to be smitten, to be struck. And the reality is, the consequence of that, in the short term, is the sheep are scattered.

As Jesus predicts, this very night you'll all fall away on account of me. But, after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.

[13 : 33] I'm going to come back. I will come back. I will come back as the risen shepherd and I will regather my sheep.

Well, we know, don't we, what he's referring to when he talks about the shepherd being struck as he applies it to himself and as he just looks forward into the next few hours when they're going to take him and crucify him upon a cross.

So, what is he saying? In effect, he's saying, I will again shepherd you. And, and, and, and therefore, he's pointing us to this almost unbelievable truth that at this world's greatest crisis against which all our challenges really pale into insignificance, whatever they may be, at this world's greatest crisis when the enemies of God take his son and crucify him upon a cross and rub their hands and clean, so that's the end of him and that's the end of all God's plans and purposes.

At this moment of greatest crisis, God says, I am the one who smites the shepherd. I am in this. And, and you know, the truth is, my friends, that that's, sometimes I come to parts of the word of God that if they were not there in black and white, I would hardly dare even to speak of things around which I can scarcely get my head when it comes to Calvary, when it comes to the cross of Jesus Christ.

And, and when we ask the question, now who is responsible for this? Who, who, who is the guilty party in this travesty of justice, this barbaric ill treatment of a human being?

[15 : 46] and we might, with some justification, say, of course, it was Pilate and so it was. He was the one who delivered him up to the cross. Or we might say it was the Roman soldiers, they were the ones that hammered the nails in.

Or we might say that it was, of course, the rulers and teachers of the law who'd been plotting for this. Or we might say it was the population at large who held out, crucify him.

Or you might say if you are theologically astute, well, I am responsible for this because it is my sin that nailed into the cross.

And all those answers would be accurate and true and scriptural except there is another answer that if it were not in the scripture you would hardly dare to believe.

It pleased the Lord to bruise him. And Paul standing up, Peter standing up on the day of Pentecost and referring to this event says, God delivered him over with his foreknowledge.

[17 : 00] God set him forth to hang and bleed and die upon that cross his own son. And so the ultimate answer when it comes to Calvary is that it is God's doing.

It is the sovereignty of God who was pleased to bruise his own son that he might be pleased with somebody like me.

And I'm just almost lost for words really. which is not a good thing for a preacher is it? But it just staggers me.

It pleased the Lord to bruise him. I will smite the shepherd. The point at issue when it comes to confidence to find some encouragement to face the future whatever it might hold to be absolutely persuaded that God is in control is to look to that cross and see is God in control there?

Because if he is then I can have utmost confidence in any lesser event that takes place either in my life or in the life of Christian churches.

[18 : 24] And that is exactly what Zechariah is saying as he pronounces the word of God and as Jesus applies it to himself this is God saying I'm going to smite this shepherd and the sheep certainly will be scattered and they're going to have to face some real challenges that's what Calvary produces doesn't it even for those who are closest to the Lord Jesus and they fail and they're scattered and they end up a frightened bunch of dispirited men locked away in an upper room but I will come again and I will shepherd them again so here as the absolute demonstration that we can have utmost confidence in a sovereign God stands the cross of Jesus Christ and that's where we're going to have to come and and it's this central truth of the gospel that we're going to have to reaffirm and every preachers allowed one hobby horse surely and I've got one because it's a matter of observation as I just go around different churches that I don't hear this gospel message as being preached all that often

I hear some wonderful expositions of the word of God wonderful and meticulous and precise and accurate explanations of the text I don't hear alas too much I'm afraid of Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners because the thinking is that well that's that's the ABC stuff of the gospel and we move on from that and we need to delve into the profound things of the scripture and of course there's so much to be found this mine never never ceases to yield its treasures but if that if that moves away from this central core truth of the gospel

Christ Jesus came into is there anything more profound than that this cross that God in his saving purposes for wretched lost sinners like you and me determined in eternity past should be the central point of the history of this world God this sovereign God determined to save and going to those extreme lengths to save sinners if God is not sovereign here we have no hope but I want to I want to find confidence in a sovereign God I want to be reassured he is in control and I look out upon the chaos of my world and I look into the tangle of my own heart and I fear for what the future might bring for us as gospel churches and I want to be reassured so I come to

Calvary and I see God in control even there and how wonderfully appropriate it is that this first Sunday of 2014 should end around this table to bring us back again and this is a message that we've got to declare this is a message we've got to preach not just as passing reference in some detailed exposition of some passage of scripture if we have any expectations for 2014 it's got to rest in a crucified and risen Christ a shepherd struck by the great shepherd on behalf of sinners like you and me and yet gloriously rising again to be once again the shepherd of his people that's where I find my confidence

I want to encourage you to that same confidence and I would I think I would dare to go further my reading of the New Testament as those New Testament apostles wrestled with this issue and that issue in the life of the churches it wasn't all sweetness and light was it even in the very early days of the Christian church many problems many issues many challenges and the apostles guided by the Holy Spirit apply the wisdom that's been given to them as they address these problems and as they challenge and rebuke and comfort and reassure the people of God will always test it for yourself you read through the New Testament letters test it for yourself they will always come back to the gospel that's where all these things ultimately are resolved because

[24 : 41] God is sovereign even at Calvary that's the confidence that I need facing 2014 but I'm looking for comfort also how can God say they are my people how can he say that because he delivered his own son spared him nothing because he delivered him up to the cross that's how they are my people how may we say the Lord is our God how can we say that how can we claim to be the possession of almighty God how can we say of this awesome being who created the universe who dwells in light unapproachable whom no man has seen at any time who is all holiness and purity and perfect justice how can we say of such a

God this God is my God because if I can say that I've found comfort haven't I I've found along with the confidence that I find in the cross I've found the comfort to keep my soul how can I say that how how how can we tonight claim ourselves to be the possession of the living God to belong to him just love the way in which the Bible just reaffirms that to us reassures us of this great truth how do we belong to him how do we belong to our saviour and say of him my Lord and my God as Thomas did because he chose us to be his people there's a truth you can't escape from when you read the

New Testament that it pleased God in eternity past before he spoke the words that brought the universe into being it pleased God to choose himself a people that's how things come into your possession you choose them you look at one object or you look at another and you decide one over the other you make a choice God has made such a choice and I don't know whether there's any one of the doctrines of grace over which God has been more maligned than this one but surely makes him unfair unjust it's all done it's all done out of amazing love and grace you know brothers says the apostle Paul writing to the Thessalonians you know brothers love by God that he has chosen you that's how you know he chose us that's how we can say he is our

Lord and our God but you've come into his possession as a gift all that the father gives me will come to me says the Lord Jesus all that the father gives me Lord Lord as he prays I want that those you have given to me will be with me where I am a gift God has made you over as a gift is that not is that not supreme comfort how else do things come into your possession you purchase them you pay a price so that they may be yours that's there too we've already seen it we've come again to Calvary we've got an Old Testament prophet speaking the words of

God and he's centuries away from Calvary but he speaks of it and Jesus takes his words and applies them to himself and points us to his cross and that is the price that was paid that you might say my Lord and my God how can you know how can you find comfort how can you find reassurance in the face of 21st century challenges in that cross and I look again at the words that God speaks here through the mouth of Zechariah and it's a wee bit at first value a wee bit depressing isn't it wee bit disheartening strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered and I'll turn my hand against the little one well we've seen what that means it's not discouraging after all it's a very reverse but in the whole land declares the

[30 : 15] Lord two thirds will be struck down and perish and one third will be left in it it'll be a winning round and that doesn't sound too good does it on the face of it but we've got a truth here that runs throughout the scripture you might like to call it the doctrine of the remnant that God's whole saving purpose is directed to the preservation of the remnant of the few of the one third if you like you get it time and time throughout the Bible here's this devastating flood in Noah's day but eight only eight but eight were saved you get it again as the Israelites stand before the river Jordan and almost to a man their hearts fail within their giants and we can't go there they'll finish us off but two

Joshua and Caleb let's go and take the land you get it in the very ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ there's a point in his ministry where he's incredibly popular and great crowds are following him but then he says something that they just can't take and almost to a man they turn their backs on him and they leave and there's a note of pathos really in the words of the Lord Jesus he turns to the twelve and says are you going to go as well but they stick with him the doctrine of the remnant it is it is something I think that from time to time is hard to cope with to be so few among so many

I was once in a shopping mall and been on a shopping expedition with my wife my daughter in law and my granddaughter and we'd been around and done various things and then I thought we'd come to the end of our trip and then they said to me oh there's something else we need to do we'll just be five minutes so I said well I'll sit here and wait for you so I sat down if ever I was befated of the truth of Einstein's theory of relativity I was then because their five minutes to me was an hour and a half but I sat there and I just watched the people go by I don't know in that time it was an hour and a half they kept me waiting in that time I don't know a couple of hundred people must have passed me and I looked at them and I thought how many of you how many of you know anything about the things of God am I just the only one it's the

Elijah syndrome isn't it I alone am left do you ever feel like that do you feel perhaps at school you're the only one do you feel at college you're all on your own do you feel it at your place of work you're on your own do you find it in your road amongst your neighbours you're on your own do you perhaps even some of you find it in your own family circle it's not easy to handle it is it to be just one of a few amongst so many but here's the comfort of the word of God God's saving purposes which reach their climax in the cross of Calvary are directed to the preservation of the few of the remnant all God's saving determination and the length to which he has gone is all for the sake of the one third of the few that's where comfort's to be found and somehow and I wish

I could explain this to you and I wish I knew how this was going to happen but I don't but somehow the few are going to become the multitude that no man can number so says the word of God there's comfort isn't there confidence and comfort so the people of God they face their challenges as they feel their pressure as they cope with the crises that come thick and fast and as they stand at the beginning of 2014 come again to Calvary to the cross he is a sovereign

[35 : 36] God that's my confidence he is a saving God who was prepared to live up his own son for me that's my comfort and I belong to him for time and for eternity you are my people God says and we gladly respond you are our God and we will call upon you and you will answer Amen