

Devotion for Ash Wednesday – February 18, 2026

Zechariah 1:1-6 EHV

Theme: “Return to me,” declares the LORD of Armies

- 1) Take His warning to heart.
- 2) Return to Him, and He will fight for you.

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo. ²The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. ³Therefore, now you are to tell this people that this is what the LORD of Armies says to them. Return to me, declares the LORD of Armies, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies. ⁴Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, “This is what the LORD of Armies says. Return, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.” But our forefathers did not listen, nor did they pay attention to me, declares the LORD. ⁵Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely? ⁶But my words and my statutes, which I commanded to my servants the prophets, caught up with our forefathers, didn’t they? Then they returned and said, “Because of our ways and our deeds, the LORD of Armies has done to us just as he planned to do to us.”

What will it take to get you to change the way you live?

Think about your health, for example. What will finally get you to eat healthy and exercise? Will your spouse’s gentle encouragement do it? How about feelings of fatigue or your doctor’s warnings? Will news of a friend’s recent heart attack move you to change your ways, or do you have to experience one on your own?

In Zechariah’s day, God’s people had already had their ‘spiritual heart attack’—seventy years in exile under foreign powers. Yet, astonishingly, they were still drifting back into the same habits.

What will it take for God’s people to change: to abandon sinful spiritual habits and desires that only lead to destruction? What will it take for you to do the same?

“Return to me,” declares the LORD of Armies. Not only was that Zechariah’s message for his contemporaries, but it is also God’s message to us. 1) Take His warning to heart. 2) Return to Him, and He will fight for you.

Part One: Take His warning to heart.

Our text takes us back to the year 520 BC. For seventy long years, God's people had lived in captivity under the Babylonians and Persians because of their unfaithfulness to Him.

The LORD, however, remained faithful to His Word. He brought His people back to the promised land so they could rebuild the temple, renew their covenant with Him, and live again under His loving protection.

Fifteen years had passed since they returned, and the people were already showing signs of unfaithfulness. They prioritized their own personal goals and well-being over their relationship with the LORD.ⁱ Instead of worshipping Him from the heart, they merely went through the motions, distracted by worldly concerns.

Does that sound familiar?

Like the Jews in Zechariah's day, God has also saved us—to build His temple. Not a building of stone, but a spiritual house. The LORD wants us to use our callings—as husbands and wives, parents and children, workers and employers, neighbours and citizens—to draw attention to Him. He calls us to serve others instead of serving ourselves. He gives us daily opportunities to speak the good news of Jesus. He gathers us for worship so we can encourage one another in the faith. He even promises to provide what we need for body and life as we seek His kingdom above all else.ⁱⁱ

But do we act on God's promises? Or do we prioritize things like career advancement, life experiences, and having earthly comfort ahead of Him?

Think about it:

- We say we “don't have time” for personal devotions, but we always seem to have time for podcasts, shows, and scrolling through social media.
- We say we “can't make it” to worship often, but we can make time for sports, trips, and hobbies.
- We claim to want a deeper relationship with God, but avoid Bible study.

Has our worship become like that of the Jews in Zechariah's time: focused more on getting it done than on celebrating our Saviour from the heart?

If we're honest with ourselves, we are not unlike the people to whom Zechariah preached. Therefore, take God's warning to heart:

⁴Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, “This is what the LORD of Armies says. Return, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.” But our forefathers did not listen, nor did they pay attention to me, declares the LORD.

As the LORD graciously chose Old Testament Israel to be His people, so He graciously chose and saved you as well. For what purpose? To belong to Him. To be His dearly loved people through whom He shines the light of His forgiving love.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sadly, God’s Old Testament people abandoned their covenant relationship with the LORD. They wanted to be more like the surrounding nations, who chased after gods that promoted greed and unrestrained, sinful pleasure. They despised the very law God had given for their protection and good.

For centuries, the LORD bore with them patiently. He sent prophet after prophet to call them to repentance. He allowed troubles to come as warnings—a small taste of the disaster that would fall if they did not repent. Still, they refused to listen.

Even though the LORD takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked,^{iv} He finally acted on His threats. The LORD of Armies sent King Nebuchadnezzar. His army destroyed Jerusalem, tore down the temple, and carried God’s people away.

The LORD asks:

⁵Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely? ⁶But my words and my statutes, which I commanded to my servants the prophets, caught up with our forefathers, didn’t they?

Picture the impact of those words. The people of Zechariah’s day were standing among the eighty-five-year-old ruins of their once proud city - charred rubble scattered everywhere. Everything their forefathers thought would always be there—gone. They thought God was exaggerating. They thought His threats did not apply to them. But they did.

Then they returned and said, “Because of our ways and our deeds, the LORD of Armies has done to us just as he planned to do to us.”

Having experienced God's promised judgment over sin, the surviving remnant finally repented. Even though they had to live in exile for 70 years, they lived in hope. They trusted that, just as the LORD kept His Word of judgment, He would also keep His promise to mercifully bring them back to the promised land and provide a Saviour.

Regarding God's judgment over His Old Testament people, the apostle Paul wrote: "*Now these things took place as examples to warn us not to desire evil things the way they did.*"^v In other words: Learn from them. Don't repeat their mistakes.

We would do well to pay attention to that warning. Why? Because we, too, are tempted to pursue our selfish desires at the expense of our relationship with the LORD. We are tempted to think that our worldly pursuits are not that big of a deal, that the warnings pastors, elders, and fellow Christians express don't really apply to us because our situation is different.

But, as God pointed out to the believers in Zechariah's day, His warning applies to us too. We are no different from them. So, take His warning to heart!

Part Two: Return to Him, and He will fight for you.

But God didn't just give his people a warning; He also offered them a powerful promise:

Return to me, declares the LORD of Armies, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies.

The LORD had shown nothing but grace to His Old Testament people. He could have left them wallow in their exile forever, but He didn't. He restored them. He forgave them. He wanted to bless them again.

Therefore, He emphatically urged them to stop their spiritual backsliding and return to Him. Why? Because He stood ready to bless them with His mercy and grace. He, the LORD of Armies, stood ready to fight for them — not just against human enemies, but against their greater spiritual enemies.

As the LORD called to His people through Zechariah, so He calls to you now:

Return to me, declares the LORD of Armies, and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies.

Yes, turn back from pursuing worldly things. Recognize your sinfulness, repent, and in the peace of His forgiveness, pursue the LORD in faith.

Why? Because He is the LORD of Armies: the all-powerful God who commands angels, directs the rise and fall of empires, and rules over history. He, the LORD of Armies, graciously promises to fight for you, as proven by Jesus' cross.

Bound to the devil by the chains of sin, you were once doomed to an everlasting existence apart from God in hell. But the LORD beheld your wretched state and chose to love you from before the creation of the world. Yes, the LORD chose to fight to rescue you so you could belong to Him.

How did He plan to accomplish it? By sending His only begotten Son into the world as a human to do what we could not do. He kept God's law perfectly in our place - never once chasing worldly fame, fortune, or ease at the expense of God's holy will.

Then He took our sins onto Himself. Every selfish choice. Every moment of spiritual laziness. Every time we wanted to blend in with the world instead of standing with the LORD. He carried those sins to the cross to suffer and die for them all.

He satisfied God's justice. And to prove that the devil's power was broken and sin was paid for, He rose from the grave.

It is finished. Your sins are forgiven forever!

It is finished. The devil can no longer accuse you before God.

It is finished. Death has been defeated. Everlasting life with God awaits you.

It is finished. Your life has a new purpose and meaning. You live to advance God's kingdom of grace by sharing the Gospel, so that others may repent, believe in Jesus, and be saved.

Yes, many enemies still surround you in this world - tempting and troubling you. But the LORD of Armies stands with you and fights for you. He is with you in every hardship and heartache. He carries you through every trouble as you cling to Him in faith. He will keep His promise to deliver you from every evil attack and bring you safely home to Himself in heaven.^{vi} He will keep His promise to work in all things - even the evil you experience - for your everlasting good.^{vii}

So, what is it going to take to wake you up from unhealthy, worldly pursuits? Just as junk food and a lack of exercise harm the body, so the desires of the flesh damage the soul.

The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.^{viii}

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the LORD of Armies is calling you this Lenten season:

Return to Me.

Return from the pet sins you pursue. Return from the sinful habits that choke your faith. Return from your excuses, spiritual apathy, and the love of the world.

Repent and return to the LORD.

Why?

So He can return to you with His forgiving love, peace, and blessing.

Yes, use this Lenten season to return to the LORD of Armies who fights for you. Why? Because, in Christ, He has already returned to you. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Haggai 1:9

ⁱⁱ Cf. Matthew 6:31-33 & Luke 12:29-31

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Exodus 19:3-6 & 1 Peter 2:9-10

^{iv} Cf. Ezekiel 33:11

^v 1 Corinthians 10:6 EHV

^{vi} Cf. 2 Timothy 4:18

^{vii} Cf. Romans 8:28

^{viii} 1 John 2:17