

3. The next part of the burden (13:1-9) shifts the emphases, but not the prophetic time frame or circumstance. It pertains to the same episode of fulfillment, evident in its introductory phrase, “in that day” (13:1). And so, however one interprets the prophetic content of chapter thirteen, it cannot be divorced from chapter twelve; the two chapters must be interpreted together. This is not to say that this new section doesn’t advance the burden; it does in a very important way: It shows that deliverance and repentance (mourning) aren’t Yahweh’s final goal in His triumphal intervention. His goal in rising up on behalf of David’s house, Judah and Jerusalem wasn’t that they should at last acknowledge their culpability and unbelief; neither was it that they would mourn over what they had done. Discernment and repentance were certainly necessary, but insufficient; what was needed was purging followed by restoration. Thus the Lord’s burden concerning Israel advanced from the ideas of triumphal deliverance and repentance to that of purgation: *In that Day, the Lord of Hosts was going to open a cleansing fountain for the mourners to deal finally and definitively with sin and impurity* (cf. 13:1 with 12:7-10).

a. The opening verse of chapter thirteen proclaims the Lord’s design; the next four verses elaborate on it, showing just what His work of cleansing involves. And what is striking in this elaboration is that it doesn’t at all deal with matters of *personal* sin and uncleanness. Rather, it focuses on the issues of Israel’s *corporate violation* as Yahweh’s covenant household. Though this may seem strange to individualistically-oriented contemporary Christians (who tend to think of sin, impurity and cleansing in personal and individual terms), it perfectly accords with the perspective and orientation of the larger burden (and Israel’s scriptures). For the burden doesn’t concern itself with the individual Israelite as such, but with *Israel* as Yahweh’s covenant “son”: the regal and priestly community in whom the Lord’s covenant with Abraham was corporatized; the covenant kingdom which Yahweh ruled from Jerusalem through the house of David.

This is not to imply that this cleansing fountain has no pertinence whatsoever to individual persons; it is, however, to emphasize that the concern here isn’t the “salvation” of individuals – even individual Israelites – but the Lord’s fulfillment of His long-standing pledge to inaugurate and establish the kingdom promised to David (and Abraham) by purging Zion and her children of their iniquity and impurity and healing them from the ravages of their waywardness.

b. So this purging work has reference to the *land* (13:2b). Clearly the Lord’s concern was with people and not a piece of real estate, but this language highlights the covenant emphasis – the kingdom emphasis – that is in view. Yahweh was going to purge His covenant kingdom (expressed here in terms of David’s house, Jerusalem and Judah, but elsewhere in Zechariah (and the other prophets) in terms of *Zion*) of all impurity and corruption; thus the “land” would be cleansed of all that defiles and destroys (cf. 3:9-10, 5:1-11, 7:1-14, 8:1-12, 9:15-17). Israel’s scriptures everywhere indicate the covenantal (rather than geographical) signification of the “land,” but this idea is pronounced in the New Testament. For there the “land” – the inheritance promised to Abraham’s offspring – becomes the *earth*: the renewed creation (cf. Romans 4:13; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:5).

The “land” thus signifies *sacred space*: the Lord’s covenant endowment to His children – the sanctuary-habitation which He determined to share with His image-sons as their everlasting dwelling place together. This habitation had its germinal expression in Eden and later in the land of Canaan (cf. Genesis 12:7-8, 13:18, 21:22-34 with Exodus 15:17). Eventually Canaan – Yahweh’s sanctuary land – obtained its focal point in Jerusalem (Zion) as the Lord’s dwelling place and the seat of His throne (ref. 2 Samuel 6:1-17). David was the Lord’s chosen son-king who established His throne in Jerusalem, but he also enlarged His kingdom to the boundaries promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Genesis 15:18-21 and Deuteronomy 1:5-8 with 1 Kings 4:21). *Importantly, David didn’t do this by annexing these lands beyond Canaan or by converting their inhabitants to Judaism.* David’s kingdom – the kingdom God pledged to Abraham – was a *composite* kingdom consisting of Hebrew and Gentile subjects. David ruled over the nations *as such*: not as proselytes, but as Gentiles bound under his kingship. This dynamic alone indicated that the land of Canaan didn’t bound the covenant inheritance pledged to Abraham and his seed; the covenant “land” – Yahweh’s dwelling place with His people – was to encompass the whole earth.

These ideas are intrinsic to the concept of the “land” and illuminate the reason the land was at the center of the Lord’s promise of purging (cf. again 3:9-10). In this context, the purging of the land is treated in terms of two dimensions of uncleanness and corruption: the land’s *idols* and its *prophets* (13:3-6).

- c. With respect to *idols*, the implication is that Yahweh’s habitation was completely overrun with idols and therefore utterly defiled. Indeed, He had departed from His sanctuary on Mount Zion because of this defilement (ref. Ezekiel 8-10). Zion was no longer fit for (or worthy of) His presence, and He would not – and could not – return to her until she was purged. The Lord’s departure from Zion – and so the exile of her children – testified to the land’s defilement; so His promise to return, restore and regather was His pledge to purge.

It’s noteworthy that the burden spoke of purging the *names* of the idols from the land rather than the idols themselves. There are important reasons for this:

- 1) First of all, names in the Scripture don’t merely *specify* a thing (a person, place, object, etc.) as they do in contemporary western culture; rather, they speak to the *truth* of the thing: what it is in itself or what it signifies. (Consider the naming of people and places in the book of Genesis.) And for this reason, an entity was, in a certain sense, *actualized* by the naming process – that is, given concrete identity and definition.
- 2) In terms of idols and idolatry, an idol is only an *idea* until it is named. Naming an idol transforms it from an ethereal concept into an entity that has substance and definition; once named, an idol is endowed with “life” so that it can now be interacted with in word as well as deed. *Thus naming an idol is fundamental to it becoming an object of worship.*

- 3) An entity can only be worshipped if it is named; one cannot worship that which has no substance or definition – no “life.” Thus, “cutting off the *names* of the idols from the land” speaks to their effective eradication by eliminating the possibility of acknowledging and interacting with them; as their names pass away, so will their identity and their worship.

Thus the sovereign, invincible Lord of Hosts was here pledging a complete and final purging. He was going to cleanse His sanctuary land, and this meant ridding His dwelling place of every vestige, memory and notion of that which is not God. In that day, the Lord was going to be king over all the earth; in that day He would be the only God and His name the only name (14:9).

Yahweh explicitly attributed this purging to Himself, but the contextual indication is that He was going to do this *through His shepherd-king*, the Branch of David. The burden suggests this indirectly by its introduction of Josiah – the son of David who purged Judah and Samaria of their idols; Yahweh’s faithful son-king whom Jerusalem and David’s house mourned when they learned of his piercing and death. More directly, the burden goes on to speak of the people’s cleansing (the removal of their dross) and full reconsecration to Yahweh in connection with the striking of the Shepherd (ref. 13:7-9; cf. 9:9-17). Beyond this, Zechariah’s larger prophecy supports this idea, most notably in the hinge vision of chapter 3.

- d. This purging work was secondly going to involve the eradication of the land’s *prophets* (vv. 2b-5). Several things about this promise are important to note:

- 1) First of all, the context makes it clear that these are men who present themselves as Yahweh’s prophets but are actually *false prophets*: They “speak falsely in the name of the Lord” (v. 3b) and are depicted as putting on a mantle of hair (reminiscent of Elijah – 2 Kings 1:8) in order to deceive their hearers (v. 4b). Moreover, the judgment against them is the judgment against the land’s idols. Finally, the falseness of these prophets is indicated by their close association with a “spirit of uncleanness” (v. 2b). (This expression doesn’t refer to an actual spirit being, but to a *principle* of uncleanness – in context, the principle of unbelief and waywardness that defiles and drives men in their alienation from God.)

Various things could render an Israelite unclean, but the most vile form of uncleanness was that which was associated with idolatry (cf. 2 Chronicles 29; Ezra 6:19-21, 9:1-11; Lamentations 1:8-9; Ezekiel 36:16-18, 39:23-24). And Israel’s idolatry – her apostasy – was promoted and fueled by her prophets who claimed to speak for Yahweh but were actually leading the people away from Him (cf. Deuteronomy 13:1-5; John 10:1ff). *The false prophets were thus marked by a spirit of uncleanness, so that ridding the land of these prophets and the idolatry they fostered meant purging the unclean (deceiving and apostatizing) spirit which animated them and made their deception effective* (cf. Ezekiel 36:24-29).

- 2) Secondly, purging the land of the “spirit of uncleanness” implicated the *land’s inhabitants* (again, David’s covenant household – 13:1 with 12:10-14) as well as their prophets. For, even as this “spirit” drove the prophets in the ideas they conceived and the words they spoke, so it made the people receptive to what they heard; *the “spirit of uncleanness” gave them itching ears which the false prophets scratched* (cf. Isaiah 30:1-10; Jeremiah 6:1-15, 23:9-16, 28:1-17; Ezekiel 13:1-16, 22:23-31; Micah 3:5-7; etc.). And so, purging the land of this “spirit” meant that the people of the land would no longer be subject to it. The burden expresses this truth in two ways: First, those who hear the words of these prophets will be able to recognize them as false prophets; secondly, the hearers will stand against them. When Yahweh deals with the “spirit of uncleanness,” His people will be marked by *discernment* and *zeal*: They will discern and hate what is false and delight in and be zealous for the Lord and His truth. The burden captures this with the powerful imagery of parents who, discerning their son – their own flesh and blood – to be a false prophet, take his life with their own hands out of zeal for the Lord (v. 3).

- 3) Discernment and zeal will mark the people at that time, but also the *false prophets themselves*. Their eyes, too, will be opened and they will be filled with shame and remorse (13:4). So far from claiming the distinguishing title of prophet, such ones will renounce it, declaring themselves to be mere “workers of the land” just like their fellow countrymen (13:5). Some interpret verse 5 negatively as a disingenuous, self-serving statement born out of fear of reprisal (ref. again v. 3). This is certainly possible, but the intimate relation between verses 4 and 5 suggests that verse 5 should be viewed as reinforcing the authenticity of the shame and remorse indicated in verse 4. Two other things about this promise ought to be noted: First of all, it cannot be interpreted absolutely as applying to every false prophet (ref. 13:3a); secondly, it implies that the Lord’s restorative provision (v. 1) was for the *deceivers* as well as those they deceived (cf. 12:10-14).

- 4) Consistent with the above observations, the burden wasn’t predicting the eradication of the *prophetic role* as such – i.e., the communication of the Lord’s words to men. Indeed, the messianic figure who is the focal point of Zechariah’s prophecy (identified by Zechariah as the Branch of David) was heralded by Moses centuries earlier as Yahweh’s *prophet* – and that in contradistinction to Israel’s false prophets (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). What the burden was promising was the vanquishing of all lying voices among the Lord’s people – *not by their complete eradication, but as the fruit of Yahweh’s work of purging and renewal*. That is, lying voices – idolaters, false prophets and false shepherds – will still function within the covenant community, but their power of deception and apostasy will be broken. Yahweh’s sheep will discern His voice in His Shepherd – His consummate prophet and the Word uttered by all His servant-prophets – and they will reject those who would lead them astray (Hebrews 1:1-4; John 10:1-30).