

The Basket, Scroll, & the Branch

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It's good to be at the altar in times like this, to throw up our hands and say: Lord help me. Given the recent ISIS attacks in Paris, controversy over admitting Syrian refugees, and divisive speech, it's hard to ignore the timeliness of these chapters. In chapter 5, the two, interrelated visions of the *flying scroll* and the *basket of wickedness* reveal God's perspective on sin and evil. In chapter six, which we won't go into detail, he closes things out with the activity of *the Branch*, God's permanent solution to the problem of wickedness and evil. The Scroll, the Basket, and the Branch.

Flying Scroll

Imagine you're driving down I-35 and you see a massive, vertical billboard pronouncing judgment on the city. It moves across the city for all to see. Zechariah's sixth vision is of a massive, flying scroll with anthropomorphic qualities. It flies, enters, lives, and consumes. What is it? The angel replies, "[This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land.](#)" Today, the idea of a curse triggers images from Harry Potter, but "curse" was a permanent fixture in the Jewish mind. After swooping down like an eagle to rescue Israel from an oppressive Egyptian ruler, YHWH enters into a covenant relationship with Israel. A covenant is a relationship driven by love, based on law/vow. *This covenant was initiated by God's redemptive action, not by Israel's good behavior.* Declaring his love, YHWH enters the relationship based on a set of laws, crystallized in the 10 Commandments (Ex 20). If Israel keeps the vows, God promises to bless them immensely. If they break the vows, they will reap a mass of curses. Deuteronomy 28 details these blessings and curses. So when Israel "sees" the flying scroll, the curse immediately registers. They have broken covenant, betrayed relationship. How? Two sins are named in particular—[the one who steals shall be cleaned out according to what is on one side, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other side.](#) The two sides probably represent the two columns of the 10 Commandments, swearing falsely to God on one side ([him who swears falsely by my name](#), 4) and stealing from others on the other side (3). Theft and perjury (cleaned out). Let's think more about these. What kind of sin is theft? It's a sin against the community, a person or group of people unjustly taking from another person/group. Few people condone theft today. It is often accompanied by outrage. Think of the feeling you have if open your car door to discover someone has rifled through your glove box and taken some of your stuff. When someone's phone or purse is stolen, we have compassion for them. *We frown on the thief, but not on the liar.* Why not? As a society, we have made *wrong* synonymous with *harm*: "As long as it doesn't hurt anybody it's okay." We'll absorb the belief that *harm is only physical*. But the second sin shows us that "harm" is also theological. "[You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...](#)" (20:7). Taking the Lord's name in vain isn't cursing, though that is silly and irreverent. It's taking God's name but not his character. It's identity theft. I want your power but not your boundaries. I want the freedom to determine what's right for me without any accountability. We don't want a God who disagrees with us; we want a god who submits to us. We want to unseat God. Do see how its theo-centric? Sin isn't just physical; its eternal. It's selling God out for our own ends, which comes with consequences. **Sin dis-integrates us. It ruptures peace with God, but worship, worship restores peace with God. Worship puts us back**

together. Let me illustrate. Let's say you fudge the numbers at work or spend money you don't really have. What are you doing? You're stealing, yes, but why? Fundamentally you're distrusting what God has provided isn't enough. In that moment, you're driven by the belief that God isn't enough. So we steal to improve upon him: if we only had a bigger house, could give more presents this Christmas, could report a bigger bottomline, then I'd be content. We're taking the power of God without the boundaries of God; his name but not his character. So we end up worshipping what stuff can give us (positive reputation or comfort) instead of worshipping God. That failure to worship actually harms the community because now you don't have money to meet others needs, care for the poor, or contribute to gospel ministry. *A failure in worship leads to failure in morality, and failure in morality is always a failure in worship.* The flying scroll actually expands our view of thieves and perjurers to include all of us. We've all broken covenant and all deserve the curse. The scroll enters the house of the thief and idolater and consumes it, down to the hardest materials, timber and stone. God's wrath is all consuming.

Basket of Wickedness

The second vision is of a basket flying away from Jeruslaem. The basket, we're told, has a woman inside of it. Her name is Wickedness. Now is this an antiquated stab at women as wicked, misogyny? A number of reasons have been put forward: the Hebrew word has a feminine gender, or covenant breaking is sometimes depicted as prostitution, but notice where the basket is going. [To the land of Shinar](#) (10-11). Shinar is an old word for Babylon. It is the home Israel's idolatry, where they were sent in exile. Archaeological digs have discovered female Babylonian idols from this period. Ezra a contemporary of Zechariah leads Israel in corporate repentance for their idolatry (9). They have returned from Babylon but not without Babylon. They cradle her in their arms. What have you taken from Babylon? What is in your basket? What's the one thing that if it was taken away, you couldn't live without? Is it your job? Your spouse? Children? Savings account? The pity of others? As it turns out, Shinar is also the original location of the Tower of Babel, where humanity sought to "make a name for themselves." They stood in the place of God. Has life become a story about how others have let your majesty down or how you have let majestic others down? Do you rise and fall on your name? This vision shows us that God doesn't just judge sin; he banishes the wickedness of sin, idolatry, taking God's place. Next, **two women** enter the scene. They have wings like storks, probably meaning they are strong, but the word is awfully close to the Hebrew for faithful. This is probably a play on words meant to depict the women as *faithful and true*. Far from misogynist, these women are placed in a heroic role. They lift up the basket, and when Wickedness tries to escape, they thrust it down, using a lead top to shut out the radioactive idolatry. Who are these women? A phrase in verse 9 gives us a clue, "[The wind was in their wings](#)." If we click back to when Israel was in exile, we find Ezekiel the prophet has a vision of a stormy wind cloud, shiny and bright, filled by four winged creatures, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of many waters (1:24). Click back again and we find another wing of glory, God swooping down like an eagle to rescue Israel from Egypt upon his wings, and click back one more time to Genesis where we find, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the Spirit was hovering over the deep. The word hovering is the movement of a bird's wing. When we step back from Zechariah's vision of the two wind-filled, winged women we see the long thread of the Spirit. He shows up to create and to conquer, to conquer chaos and

create a new people. Here we have an image of victory, of hope, of power sweeping over wickedness to expel it forever. Rider on the storm: “[He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind](#)” (Ps 18:10). This is Almighty God on the wind of the Spirit. **He’s judging sin and expelling wickedness.** All those who repent and turn to God in Christ, will be rescued; those who refuse will be judged and expelled from the glorious presence of God. Just as the blacksmiths overthrew the horns in vision 2, the winged women overthrow the woman of wickedness in vision 7. What can we learn from this? **The Spirit wants to overthrow evil.** 1) **Evil is not a fiction.** It is a theological reality. Secularism has to borrow from the Judeo-Christian tradition to make sense of the wickedness in our world. 2) **Evil is not “out there” but in here.** We are all, in the words of Kant, crooked timber. While we cannot control extremists, we can control our extreme desires, our sin. The Spirit wants to overthrow the evil in you and me. 3) **God deals with evil head on.** He does not ignore it or valorize it, but judges it and expels it. This is a certain future. Don’t be discouraged when evil seems to be winning. God will vindicate himself and the wickedness be overthrown.

The Branch

The eighth vision essentially recycles these themes using horse-drawn chariots, an image of the sovereign power of God, much like the horses who patrol the earth in chapter one. There they found the nations at ease while Israel eked out an existence. Now, this final vision in the series ends with a horse and chariot moving toward the north, the location of Babylon, with the angel commenting: “[I have set my Spirit at rest in the north country](#)” (6:8). Why is God’s Spirit at rest? Because he no longer needs to patrol the earth. He’s overthrown evil. It is a glimpse into the future rest, the shalom of God restored on the earth. How did this happen? The text immediately cuts back to Joshua, the high priest and his colleagues who have returned from exile. Earlier in chapter three, he signified the priestly work of Christ in removing our filthy, wicked clothes to replace them with pure white vestments. Now, the very same priest is crowned *King*. In the ancient world, the priestly class and the king were often kept separate. But in this figure, the priest and the king are one. As he is crowned, [the Lord says to him, “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.](#) The reign of the Branch-King is the opposite of the scroll! Instead of entering every house and consuming, he builds and rules over a new house—the temple-People of God. Many will come to help build, meaning people from all the nations will stream back to Zion, the city of God, to enjoy his fruitful rule, a reign that brings restorative peace to every hill and home that bows to him. Now how is this possible since the covenant curse has been pronounced? As we read the Gospels, the priest comes before the king. Judgment day is rolled back early as the darkness and death curl around the tree at Golgotha. As it is written, Cursed is him who hangs on a tree. Jesus doesn’t just deflect the curse; he absorbs the curse! He shields us from the condemnation of the flying scroll and frees us from baskets of idolatry that weigh us down. It gets better: The mighty wind of the Spirit reaches down into the grave and lifts Jesus up, bearing the marks of the curse he thrusts wickedness down in resurrection power. Jesus is the Branch-King, and when the right king is on the throne, the world is put right. Peace is restored. Will you bow? [This shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God.](#) So you see, **worship puts us back together.** It restores peace with God and peace in the world. He is coming soon.