

Homiletics Analysis: Zechariah 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Zechariah 5 presents two sequential visions — the sixth and seventh of the prophet's famous night visions — each involving a different object of divine communication. In the first vision (vv. 1–4), Zechariah sees an enormous flying scroll, measuring twenty cubits by ten cubits (approximately thirty feet by fifteen feet), which the interpreting angel identifies as a curse going out over the face of the whole land. The scroll targets specifically those who steal and those who swear falsely by God's name, and the curse is declared not merely to follow such persons but to enter their houses, consuming timber and stone. In the second vision (vv. 5–11), Zechariah sees a measuring basket (an ephah), inside which sits a woman identified as Wickedness. A lead cover is pressed down over her, and then two women with stork-like wings carry the basket away to the land of Shinar — to Babylon — where a house is built for it on a prepared base, establishing Wickedness there permanently.

The two visions are paired and mutually interpreting. Together they address the covenant community's moral condition in light of restoration. The flying scroll addresses individual transgressions within Israel — specifically sins against the Decalogue's two tables (theft against neighbor; false swearing against God). The basket-and-woman vision addresses the systemic, corporate nature of wickedness as a power, and its ultimate removal from the land to its spiritual homeland in Babylon. The chapter does not speak of general sin in the abstract — it speaks of specific, named transgression within the restored community, and of what God intends to do with it.

This Text — Intent:

God intends through this chapter to produce in the restored community — and by extension in every community of God's people — a holy sobriety about the reality and power of sin, combined with an assured hope that He himself will purge wickedness from His land. The visions together do not call Israel to self-reformation; they declare that God will act. The intent is not primarily to convict (though the naming of theft and false oaths carries a convicting edge) but to assure: sin within the covenant community will not be tolerated and will not persist indefinitely. God is not a passive observer of covenant transgression. He sends the curse; He removes the wickedness; He builds the house elsewhere. The goal is a purified people in a purified land — and that purification is God's project, not Israel's achievement.

Subject Sentence: God declares He will purge sin from His covenant community — cursing transgression, removing wickedness, and establishing His land in holiness.

Primary Claim: The God who restores His people does not restore them to their sin — He is actively, sovereignly at work to drive out wickedness from His community so that the land He is blessing may also be the land He is purifying. His people can neither excuse sin as inevitable nor despair of its removal: God Himself is the agent of purification.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the flying scroll: The scroll's enormous dimensions — matching the dimensions of the porch of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:3) and the tabernacle's Holy Place — have led some interpreters to connect it specifically to the Torah or the covenant document itself, arguing that this is the covenant curse of Deuteronomy 28 flying over the land. This reading has real textual warrant: Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–28 specify curses that will consume houses and drive Israel into exile. The Reformed reading affirms this connection while insisting the scroll is not merely the *text* of the law — it is the active *operation* of the curse, personified as a dynamic agent. The scroll does not hang in the archives; it *flies*. This matters for application: the passage is not about the existence of the law but about the living, pursuing character of divine justice within the covenant community.

The woman as “Wickedness” — allegorical or literal?: Some dispensational interpreters, noting the Babylonian destination and the house built “in the land of Shinar,” have read the second vision with prophetic-literalist precision, connecting the basket to a future commercial or religious system restored in Babylon (paralleling Revelation 17–18). This reading is possible as a canonical parallel but overreaches as exegesis of this passage. The woman is explicitly labeled *Wickedness* (Hebrew *rish'ah* — the abstract noun) — the text itself signals an allegorical, personified reading. The Reformed reading takes the personification seriously: wickedness is treated here as an entitative power, a corporate spiritual reality, not merely the sum of individual bad choices. Its removal to Babylon is the reversal of exile — not Israel's departure to Babylon, but Wickedness's deportation there. Babylon is its home, not Israel's.

Implications for national versus individual sin: Some Lutheran readings emphasize the individual dimension (the Law exposing and cursing individual transgression) almost exclusively, which fits the first vision well but struggles to account for the corporate, systemic character of the second. The Wesleyan tradition rightly emphasizes the social and corporate dimension of sin but may be tempted to convert the passage into a social-ethics program — Israel needing to reform its economic and religious practices. The Reformed reading holds both: individual transgression is named and cursed (vv. 1–4), and corporate/systemic wickedness is removed by divine action (vv. 5–11). Neither dimension

collapses into the other, and neither is achieved by human effort — both involve direct divine agency.

The Reformed verdict: This passage is best read as a double vision of God’s purifying initiative within His covenant community. The scroll is the active, pursuing operation of covenant curse against named transgressors. The basket-removal is the sovereign divine act of expelling corporate wickedness from the land. Neither vision calls Israel to act — both declare what God is doing. The appropriate human response is neither passive indifference (sin will be removed regardless) nor anxious self-effort (we must purify ourselves) but covenant holiness lived in the confidence that God is active against sin and on behalf of His people.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 27:15–26; 28:15–68** — The covenant curses Moses laid before Israel; these are the curses the flying scroll now actively deploys, confirming the scroll’s covenantal character and the real consequences of covenant breach.
 - **Leviticus 14:34–45** — The “leprous house” that must have its stones pulled out and timber removed echoes the scroll’s language of entering a house to consume it; God has always treated the dwelling as implicated in its inhabitants’ transgression.
 - **Ezekiel 9:1–11** — The divine mark on the foreheads of the faithful and the sword sent through the city: God himself acts as the agent of judgment within the covenant community, targeting transgressors specifically while protecting the faithful — parallel to the scroll’s precise targeting.
 - **Revelation 17–18** — Babylon as the destination and residence of corporate spiritual wickedness; the New Testament develops the Zechariah vision canonically, giving eschatological depth to the picture of wickedness housed in its own domain, separated from the New Jerusalem.
 - **1 Peter 4:17** — “Judgment begins with the household of God” — the principle that God’s purifying work operates first within His own community directly illuminates Zechariah 5’s targeting of covenant transgressors within restored Israel.
-

Aim: To show the post-exilic community — and every community of God’s people — that God is not neutral about sin within His restored people; He is actively purging it, and this truth simultaneously warns the transgressor, comforts the faithful, and grounds the hope of a genuinely holy community.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:1	Zechariah looks up and sees a flying scroll	The prophet's active posture ("I looked again") signals a new vision sequence; the scroll is immediately visible and in motion
5:2	The scroll's dimensions: 20 cubits long, 10 cubits wide	Approximately 30 × 15 feet — an enormous object; dimensions match Solomon's Temple porch (1 Kings 6:3) and the tabernacle Holy Place
5:3a	The angel identifies it as "the curse that is going out over the face of the whole land"	<i>Alah</i> (curse/oath) — covenantal language; "going out" (<i>yotze'et</i>) — active, present-tense movement; this is not a threat but an operative judgment
5:3b	Every thief will be cut off; every false swearer will be cut off	Two specific sins named: theft (8th commandment) and false swearing by God's name (3rd commandment) — the two tables of the Decalogue implicitly in view
5:4	The LORD declares He has sent out the curse; it will enter the house of the thief and the false swearer and consume timber and stone	Direct divine agency — "I have sent it out" (<i>hitzati</i>); the curse is not merely verbal judgment but consuming, penetrating reality; it inhabits and destroys
5:5–6	The angel instructs Zechariah to look; he sees an ephah (measuring basket) going out	The ephah (<i>eiphah</i>) is a standard dry-measure container — approximately one bushel; it is also used in commercial contexts, potentially echoing economic injustice
5:6b	The angel identifies it as "their iniquity in all the land"	Hebrew <i>einam</i> (their eye/appearance) vs. <i>avonam</i> (their iniquity) —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		textual variant; most interpreters follow LXX and context: the basket represents collective wickedness
5:7	A lead disc/cover is lifted and a woman is sitting inside the ephah	The woman is confined within the basket — wickedness is contained, not running free; the lead cover (<i>kikkar 'operet</i>) emphasizes heaviness, restriction
5:8	The angel identifies her as Wickedness (<i>rish'ah</i>) and thrusts her down into the basket, pressing the lead over her	<i>Rish'ah</i> — the abstract feminine noun for wickedness; she attempts to exit but is restrained; divine sovereignty is operative — wickedness cannot escape its appointed containment
5:9	Two women with stork wings emerge and carry the basket between earth and sky	Storks (<i>hasidah</i>) have large, powerful wings — suited for carrying great loads; the women are not identified as angels or demonic; they function as agents of transportation; the basket is suspended between heaven and earth
5:10	Zechariah asks the angel where the women are carrying the basket	The prophet's question gives the angel occasion to declare the destination — a literary device giving the answer its proper weight
5:11	The angel answers: to build it a house in the land of Shinar; when the house is ready, the basket will be set there on its base	Shinar = Babylon; a <i>house</i> (<i>bayit</i>) is being prepared — a dwelling, a temple, a permanent establishment; the lead-covered basket enthroned in Babylon is the permanent relocation of wickedness away from Israel

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	5:1–4	The Flying Scroll: The Curse That Pursues Covenant Transgressors
2	5:5–8	The Ephah and the Woman: Wickedness Contained and Identified
3	5:9–11	The Basket Carried Away: Wickedness Removed to Its Permanent Home

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God declares He will purge sin from His covenant community — cursing transgression, removing wickedness, and establishing His land in holiness.

Primary Claim: The God who restores His people does not restore them to their sin — He is actively, sovereignly at work to drive out wickedness from His community so that the land He is blessing may also be the land He is purifying. His people can neither excuse sin as inevitable nor despair of its removal: God Himself is the agent of purification.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that God names your sin specifically, not generally. (*Mind/Belief*) The scroll does not fly over the land and curse “sinners” in the abstract — it targets thieves and false swearers, naming specific violations of specific commandments. God does not relate to our sin in generalities. Every person in the post-exilic community who was cutting corners commercially or swearing falsely to avoid obligation knew this vision was addressed to them by name. The invitation — and the warning — is to stop hiding inside vague categories (“I’m not perfect, but...”) and to name before God what He has already named: the specific form your covenant transgression takes, and the specific commandment it breaks.

2. Stop treating sin within the church as something God tolerates or overlooks. (*Mind/Belief*) A widespread assumption in contemporary Christianity is that God is primarily concerned with the world’s sin, not the church’s — that what happens inside the covenant community is handled by grace and therefore need not be taken with great seriousness. Zechariah 5 directly dismantles this assumption. The flying scroll goes over

the covenant land, targeting covenant people by name. The ephah contains the wickedness that has accumulated within the restored community. God does not have a lower standard for His people — He has a higher one, and He is actively at work against sin in His house first (1 Peter 4:17). The knowledge that God takes sin within the church more seriously than sin outside it should produce both humility and holiness.

3. Rest in the truth that the final removal of wickedness from God's people is God's project, not yours. (*Affections/Worship*) The two women carry the basket. The cover is pressed down by the angel. The house is built by divine appointment. Zechariah does nothing except watch. This is not an invitation to passivity in the face of personal sin — but it is a profound reorientation of ultimate confidence. The complete purification of the people of God — the final state in which wickedness has been driven out and permanently housed elsewhere — is something God will accomplish. Every believer who has been discouraged by the persistence of sin in their own life, in the church, in the world, needs to hear this: the vision of a purified people in a purified land is not a human project that may fail — it is a divine project that cannot.

4. Let the reality of God's active curse against covenant transgression produce a healthy, concrete fear of specific sin. (*Affections/Worship*) The scroll does not merely hover — it enters the house, and it consumes timber and stone. The judgment is penetrating, not superficial. There is a form of comfort in God's grace that has become so weightless it can no longer make a person take sin seriously. Zechariah 5 restores weight. The believer who genuinely understands that God is not a passive observer of their theft (in whatever form it takes — relational, financial, professional), or their dishonesty before Him (in prayer, in vow, in commitment made), will find that fear of God is not a negative emotion to be overcome but a life-giving orientation to reality. This is not fear of condemnation — it is fear of the consuming, pursuing holiness of a God who takes what happens inside His covenant community seriously enough to send a thirty-foot scroll after it.

5. Actively identify and refuse the forms of theft and false swearing that are normalized in your specific context. (*Will/Behavior*) The two sins named — theft and false swearing — are not exotic transgressions. They are the kinds of sins that get normalized within communities over time: the slightly inflated expense report, the contract term you knew was misleading, the commitment made in the Lord's name that you quietly abandoned when it became inconvenient, the vow you took at baptism or ordination or marriage that you no longer live as if it binds you. The fact that a culture — including a church culture — normalizes a behavior does not remove it from the scroll's purview. This week, identify one specific form of theft or covenant dishonesty that has become normalized in your life or community and refuse it — not merely as a matter of ethics but as an act of covenant faithfulness before a God who is paying attention and whose curse is already going out.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Zechariah 5 teaches that God's holiness is not passive but agentive — He does not wait for His people to purify themselves but sends the purifying agents Himself. The chapter reveals a God who distinguishes with precision between types of transgression (individual theft, corporate wickedness), addresses both within His covenant community, and exercises sovereign control over sin at every level — naming it, cursing it, containing it, and relocating it. The flying scroll demonstrates that divine curse is not merely a theological category but a living, pursuing, penetrating reality that honors no property line and tolerates no house that harbors covenant transgression. The ephah vision demonstrates that corporate wickedness — the accumulated spiritual power of a community's moral compromise — is something God identifies, confines, and removes. Together they disclose a God whose restoration project always includes purification, never merely relocation or improvement.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Zechariah 5 is a strong canonical witness to the Reformed insistence that God's grace and God's holiness are never in tension — the God who restores His people is the same God who purges them. The visions guard against two errors simultaneously: the antinomian error (grace means God overlooks covenant transgression) and the Pelagian error (purification is the community's achievement). Both visions place every active verb with God: He sends the curse, He identifies the wickedness, He confines it, He removes it. The human response is to watch, to receive the angel's interpretation, and to live accordingly — in covenant faithfulness, not as the mechanism of purification but as the appropriate posture of a people who know their God is acting. This frames sanctification as it must always be framed in Reformed theology: God's initiative, God's work, human response — not human initiative with divine assistance. The eschatological dimension of the second vision also points toward the consummation: the final state of the new creation is not merely one in which sin is forgiven but one in which wickedness has been entirely removed — housed permanently elsewhere, while God's people inhabit a purified land. This is the trajectory of redemptive history, and Zechariah 5 maps it with striking visual economy.

Main Takeaway

God is not neutral about sin in His house. The flying scroll is already in the air; the basket is already being carried. The God who is rebuilding His temple, restoring His city, and calling His people back is the same God who named your specific transgression by chapter and verse, who has already begun the work of removing what does not belong in the land He is purifying. You cannot out-sin His purging initiative — and you cannot escape His pursuing

holiness. Live as what you are: a people whose God takes both their sin and their purification seriously enough to act.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the two visions as disconnected.** The most common expositional error in Zechariah 5 is preaching Vision 1 (the scroll) and Vision 2 (the basket) as if they are two separate sermons on two separate topics. They are paired and mutually interpreting: the first addresses individual covenant transgression; the second addresses the corporate/systemic power of wickedness. The passage's full claim requires both. Preaching only the scroll produces a moralistic, individualistic application. Preaching only the basket produces an abstract, corporate application that never lands on the individual. Preach them together.
- **Allegorizing the scroll's dimensions away from their covenantal force.** It is tempting to mention the 30 × 15 cubit dimensions as an interesting detail and move on. The connection to the Temple porch and the tabernacle's Holy Place is not a trivia point — it signals that this is a *covenantal* document, flying from the holy place over the covenant land, enforcing covenant stipulations. Losing this connection loses the passage's grounding in the Law/covenant structure that gives the two named sins their gravity.
- **Making the two sins (theft, false swearing) merely illustrative rather than specifically diagnostic.** The scroll targets theft and false swearing — two specific commandments, one from each table of the Decalogue. These are not arbitrary examples of “sin in general.” The preacher should resist the urge to immediately generalize (“and of course this means any kind of sin”). Instead, let the passage do its named work: ask the congregation to reckon specifically with theft (in all its forms — time, property, reputation, credit) and false swearing (vow-breaking, dishonest prayer, hollow commitments made in God's name). The specificity is the point.
- **Misidentifying the agent of purification.** Perhaps the most significant homiletical pitfall is turning Zechariah 5 into a call to the community to purify itself — “we need to deal with sin in the church; here's what we need to do.” The visions do not call Israel to act. God sends the scroll; God contains the wickedness; divine agents transport the basket. The appropriate application of this passage is not “here's your purification program” but “here is the God who is already purifying — align yourself with what He is doing, and do not imagine that the project depends on you.”
- **Ignoring the corporate and systemic dimension of the ephah vision.** Evangelical preaching tends to individualize all sin — every passage becomes about “me and my sin.” The ephah vision resists this. *Rish'ah* (Wickedness) is an abstract collective noun — it represents the accumulated, entitative power of wickedness in

the community, not the sum of individuals' bad choices. There is a spiritual power of corporate moral compromise that is more than the aggregate of personal transgressions, and God addresses it as a thing to be contained and removed. Preaching that entirely individualizes this vision misses the ecclesiological and societal dimensions the passage explicitly opens.

- **Failing to hold the warning and the comfort together.** Zechariah 5 can be preached entirely as warning (the curse is coming; the scroll is pursuing; God means business about sin) or entirely as comfort (God will remove wickedness; the purification project is His; the final state will be holy). Either alone is inadequate. The warning is real — individual transgressors within the covenant community are targeted, named, and pursued. The comfort is real — corporate wickedness will not have the last word; God is removing it permanently. The preacher must preach both, in their proper relationship: the warning is urgent and personal; the comfort is assured and corporate.