

Christ Is for Us In 2018

Zechariah 3

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Turn please to Zechariah 3.

When I told someone yesterday what I'm preaching on, they responded, "Oh, Zechariah and Elizabeth. We already did that one." But there are a lot of Zechariahs in the Bible, and this is a different one. His book is easy to find. If you're in Matthew, it's just two books back in the Old Testament. We'll be reading all ten verses in this chapter that describe a wonderful vision for God's people:

¹ Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. ² And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" ³ Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. ⁴ And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." ⁵ And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by.

⁶ And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, ⁷ "Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. ⁸ Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. ⁹ For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. ¹⁰ In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree."

Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for this Word and pray that You would bless what we teach and hear from Your Word. We pray that You would be with David and Kate, and especially that You would protect and heal Kate's body. We are so grateful to have such a wonderful couple in our church. Thank You that You give us all we need in our life. Amen.

One of the most notable deaths in 2017 for me was R.C. Sproul. He left a legacy as a pastor, author, theologian, apologist and teacher. He has many books and articles that are quite accessible. In 1971 he started a ministry called Ligonier which had the motto, "We're here to serve you between Sunday School and seminary." They were there to fill the gap and God used them in that way. My wife and I were pretty young in the faith, and that's exactly what happened. Through his writings we grew so much in our faith and understanding of the Bible, and we thank God for that.

As I was preparing to preach, I told David what passage I was going to use. He responded, "Did you know one of R.C. Sproul's books was based on this passage? He said it was one of the most important books." I remember buying that book in the '90s when my oldest daughter Elizabeth was born. It's called The Priest with Dirty Clothes. I'd encourage you to pick it up for your children, your grandchildren or even yourself.

Whether you're a child or an adult, Zechariah 3 is a wonderful vision, because it answers the most important question about the human predicament: how can a person who is shameful, guilty and vile be accepted by a holy, righteous God? This chapter takes us right to this central question, but it's not without tension. Satan is standing right there on the side, pointing out every fault we have, accusing us at every turn. So this gospel isn't just an easy matter of believing the truth. Rather, there is much opposition that challenges our ability to believe what is true.

You may recall that Zechariah was writing to the people of God in the Old Testament who were coming out of the exile that started in about 587 B.C. when Babylon conquered Jerusalem because of the disobedience of the people. God used the Babylonians to judge His people for their worship of false gods. They were in exile for 70 years, until the Persian Empire ransacked Babylon. With the permission of King Cyrus and then King Darius, the people began to return to Jerusalem.

After 70 years and after the destruction the Babylonians had wrought, Solomon's temple was nothing like it used to be. The people became hugely discouraged when they saw the broken-down walls and the ruined temple, which you can read about in Ezra and Nehemiah. They also faced opposition from the people who had remained in Israel. It was a big test of their ability to trust the Lord.

God raised up two prophets to declare to them Who He was—Haggai and Zechariah. Zechariah spoke to the post-exilic community to encourage and strengthen them for the task they

faced. In his vision, Joshua in the filthy garment represented how the people felt about themselves. They realized they had sinned and that their rebellion deserved punishment. Remember the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies as the people's representative and present a sacrifice so God would forgive them? In the vision, the high priest is standing before the Lord, but he's not wearing his pure vestments. He's filthy.

As we watch this "court case" take place, we're on the line too. It's not Joshua the high priest who is at fault, but he represents the people of God. And what is God's verdict on us when we're in these filthy clothes? Will God remain gracious or have we pushed the limits of God? Have we done so much that He's no longer going to be gracious? These are the questions the people are asking as they wait upon His verdict. I'll paint the picture in three layers: the accusation, the verdict and then the promise the verdict carries for the future.

The Accusation

Consider the main characters in verse one: Joshua the high priest, the angel of the Lord, plus Satan, right there, standing at the right hand of Joshua, ready to accuse him. There is also mention of the Lord of Hosts. That implies that the heavenly hosts are with Him. In fact, these are the angels who do the bidding of God when He has them change Joshua's clothes and put on the turban. This is really a window into quite a scene—a council of Yahweh in a heavenly courtroom. It's the scene of a cosmic court case.

The accused is Joshua. The prosecutor is Satan, who is not only accusing Joshua but also all God's people whom Joshua represents. Plus we see the judge who is called the angel of the Lord. Any time in Scripture when we're told about the "angel of the Lord," that's when God's presence comes to earth. That's how He and the second Person of the Trinity—the preincarnate Jesus—comes to speak and relate. So that means the Judge is none other than Yahweh Himself. And He's the Judge we want. You don't want to be dealing with a lower court's decision. You want the supreme governing cosmic court to rule over you.

With the accuser right there, what will the Judge's determination be? As we read this passage, we really don't know what he's accusing us of. He doesn't say anything. In a sense it's shocking that God would allow Satan to be in His courtroom. But part of what's going on here, when we think about God's cosmic purposes for our world, not only does He communicate to the nations on earth Who He is, but He also communicates to the heavenly principalities, spiritual powers and evil forces Who He is and His plans.

In fact, according to Ephesians 3:10, we in this church are a testimony of the manifold wisdom of God. We display to the powers above God's grace and purpose in bringing people together by His goodness. So in this scene God is communicating even to the evil forces His

agenda, His rule and His decision. This information is public. We're reading it too. This is a public court event. And it's cosmic. You can't get higher than this courtroom.

It's highly significant that the Ruler over this case doesn't even let the accused speak, nor does He ask for evidence. Yet the fact that Joshua is there in dirty clothes is proof enough of his guilt. We can almost hear the accuser saying, "They don't deserve You. They've ruined this great place. Why would You forgive them? What grounds do You have to forgive them? You're a just God—You can't forgive them."

If you think about it, we have three enemies against us. There is our flesh—this sinful nature we're born with. We have the world that has produced sinful institutions, systems and ideas that go against God's purposes. And then we have Satan himself. And all three work in tandem. They're all baked in the same cake. They all feed on each other. Satan is just pointing out what is already true about us. You and I have sinned. We've fallen. We worship wrongly.

This is the real spiritual battle. We can think of Satan in at least four categories. He's the accuser, liar, murderer and deceiver. That's the way he does warfare. He tempts us. He lies to us. He accuses us. And we're all quite vulnerable to his methods, because what he says about us is true.

The most important question is this: how will a holy and just God be able to forgive a guilty person? It's not a real court if someone were to say, "Oh, let him go. We'll just ignore what he did." No, if there's an offense, there has to be a payment. If someone hits your bike, either the person who hit it pays for it, or you pay for it. There's always a cost somewhere.

What we're saying in this situation is, "I can't pay this cost." What will the verdict be in this court? You see, the big problem here is not really Satan the accuser. The big problem is the righteousness of God. He's the Judge. Our relationship with God is broken and we can't fix it. In Zechariah 1:2 we read, "*The Lord was very angry with your fathers.*" That was their problem—God was angry because of their sin. Yes, Satan pointed it out and accused them, trying to defeat them to the extent they would never turn to God. But God was angry with them; likewise, He's angry with us because of what we've done.

Zechariah's vision calls us to look to the Judge. When Satan tempts us to despair because of our guilt, "upward I look at see Him there, Who made an end to all my sin." That's the goal. But before we get there, it's important that we realize how accusations work.

Let's go now to our second point.

The Verdict

How does God deal with the reality of our guilt? Listen to how God responds to the accusation in Zechariah 3:2: "*The Lord rebuke you.*" In other words, "I, the Lord, rebuke you,

Satan.” *“The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?”* This is obviously a reference to Joshua, the high priest. Here he’s called a burnt stick. He has nothing to bring in his defense. The judgment is that he’s guilty through and through. He was standing there because of what another had done.

This is an important metaphor, a clear window into the condition of our world. For example, John writes, *“We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one”* (1 John 5:19). The entire world is in the domain of darkness except for those whom God has rescued. But God has chosen some, plucking them out of the fire, giving them life and drawing them to Himself. Until that point, each of us is still in the fire, in the domain of darkness. It’s not like there are humans in God’s courtroom who weren’t also rescued by God.

This is the meaning of the gospel. All of us must realize that no one is righteous. There is no one who does good or who can save themselves. Each of us must be radically, supernaturally saved, as though plucked from a fire. We’re on the verge of being consumed when God rescues us.

If you’re a Christian, your testimony is, “He saved me. I wasn’t looking for Him. In my selfishness, I was doing life my own way. My intentions and works may have looked good, but ultimately it was all for me. But then God rescued me.” Some of you may have been more radical in your decision, being more obviously headed in a bad direction when God rescued you. But each one of us have as part of our story, “God rescued me.” But it doesn’t end there.

Look at Zechariah 3:3-5: *“Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments.”* That’s the evidence of his guilt. *“And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you,’”* confirming that the garments represented his transgressions and rebellion. Then look at what He does: *“And I will clothe you with pure vestments.”*

Whoa! Look at the two sides of this bargain with God. This is a clear reflection of the gospel. Yes, there’s forgiveness of sin, which is the removal of the iniquity. But there is also the crediting to us of Christ’s goodness, which is represented by the pure white garments.

Maybe some of you have seen in the news the baptisms that are being done in Iran. If you have, you’ve seen that they’re wearing white garments. We don’t do that here, but that’s a tradition in the Middle East. That’s a testimony to the reality that they’ve become new people, cleansed by Christ, so now they’re wearing His righteousness. The white robes are a powerful visual image of what God has done. So we need to think about the gospel in both of these ways.

Jerry Bridges, in talking about justification, says it’s two sides of the same coin. On one side we’re declared “not guilty” —having our dirty garments removed—and on the other side we’re declared righteous, receiving new clothes. Justification is “just as if I’d never sinned” and

“just as if I had always obeyed.” That’s what the New Testament teaches us. It’s important that this profound truth runs deep in our hearts.

Picture this illustration: You’re with your spouse at the table with a bank statement that shows a tremendous amount of debt. It would take both of you working hard for a lifetime to begin paying off the debt. Even adding in your kids, they too could never pay it off. You’re completely sunk. But then a benefactor graciously comes in and pays that debt. Then shortly after this, you and your spouse are again at the table looking at your next bank statement. And there it says your debt is zero! You can’t believe it. Who would be so generous as to pay it off? You’re rejoicing together. But then it occurs to you that you had gotten into debt once, what would prevent it from happening again? This is where our human ingenuity kicks in. “We’ll work harder. We’ll be more careful.”

No! The same benefactor, in that same account, has credited you with an astronomical amount of money. It’s enough to blow your mind. And you’re thinking, “Wait a minute? Did that really come from the same person who paid our debt?” After some dreaming about buying a new car and traveling to Hawaii, you realize, “Wait. This isn’t meant for us. It’s no longer about me, me, me to get, get, get.”

No, what has happened is you’ve become a new creature and the Holy Spirit starts to direct your thinking. “How can I serve? Who can I give this to?” You have a new identity. When the gospel does its true work, it doesn’t lead to licentiousness or abuse or greed. When you realize that God now sees you as He sees Christ, your response will be to live out that same grace in the context of the needs of others.

The Promise

We see in Zechariah 3:6 that the verdict results in a promise: *“The angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua.”* He said, *“If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge...”* In other words, the new identity Joshua was given, as symbolized in the new vestments, now required a new obedience and a new way of life. The promise, if he would walk in God’s ways, was this: *“Then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.”*

The question we’re asking here is this: was the promise only for Joshua the high priest in that day? It wasn’t! We know that, because it’s clearly the same promise that we’re given in the New Testament. But look at verse eight to see how the promise was given.

By the way, the New Testament name Jesus is the counterpart of the Old Testament name Joshua. So we have a symbolic connection in this story. Joshua the high priest seems to be tied to Jesus, our High Priest.

But there's more: "*Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign.*" They're a sign. They're symbolic of things to come.

The Lord continues, "*Behold, I will bring my servant the Branch...*" He then mentions a stone. Branch—Servant—Stone. If we look in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, it is clear that all these images are Messianic titles. For example, Isaiah speaks of the suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:5: "*But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.*" He goes on to say, "*The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*" So our filthy garments were not simply tossed out and burned. No, those garments were worn by the Servant of the Lord. Our iniquity was placed on Him.

That was the cost our Judge, God Almighty, was willing to pay. It was the will of the Lord to crush His Son and put Him to grief, so you and I could have forgiveness—and so we could be credited with all His goodness, His righteousness and His perfect obedience. Those are our new vestments. It's a profound and radical gospel truth. You might not have realized it was in the Old Testament quite this clearly. But isn't it a beautiful story line, imaged in just ten verses?

Think about how this drives us away from all our pride and arrogance, from every lustful thought, every bad deed, every arrogant word, every moment of anger. Jesus paid for all of these on the cross. He took all our filth and grime—our guilt, shame and evil—upon Himself and dealt with them. How did He do this? Verse nine is an interesting verse: "*For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.*"

At the first reading, you might think this is a poetic expression or wishful thinking. But when you read the Gospels, that actually happened. That "single day" was Good Friday, the day when all sins were forgiven. All because of one act of our Savior on the cross, we have not only had our old garments taken away, but we have received His garments. His righteous life has been credited to our account. How wonderful to think about the gospel! This is the meaning of justification. It's the hope we have.

So let's review these promises. We have a new identity in Christ that results in new obedience and new love. The new obedience is also part of the gospel, because Jesus—our High Priest—was the One Who perfectly walked in the ways of the Lord and kept His charge. He was the One Who ultimately earned all the promises about being given the right of access into God's presence. So as He represents us, we're also given access into the throne room of God. It's there that Jesus also intercedes for us.

The result is that we desire to follow Him. We are now desiring the same obedience He desired. It's a way to test whether we're really interested in being His followers. When we read about how He cared for the sick and showed compassion to the needy, how He led people, this is what shapes our own lives. If He is our joy and delight, we want to walk as He walked. That's the new obedience into which the gospel leads us.

Christ is the Branch, the Servant and the Stone—the Pillar or Cornerstone. In Zechariah's vision, the stone had seven eyes, representing perfection of vision. God sees everything and nothing surprises Him. He's not surprised by our sin. None of the accusations made against us surprise Him. Yet He still is for us. He's still the Rock on which we stand.

Then notice in verse ten that this also results in a new love for others: *"In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree."* This gospel produces in us a generosity. We will be eager to have others come under our vine and fig tree. Maybe that's the connection to the branch image—our desire to invite others to join us. That's what the gospel produces in us: a new love for those who are still in the darkness, still in the fire, whom God has yet to rescue. He will be pulling out other burnt sticks, so He can clothe them with the same righteousness for His own glory. We're now inviting people to be joined to the Branch and to bear the same fruit. We will say, "Come and taste what He's given us. This is all for Him and for His glory. Come, eat of the fruit of this Vine. It's so wonderful." This will be a warm and loving invitation. People will respond. Don't think they'll be reluctant to come under the shade of the vine or eat of the fruit. Remind yourself that they're lost and they've lived under Satan's tyrannical rule long enough. They need a Redeemer.

But there is opposition. Think about the excuses people make. We try to clothe ourselves, like Adam and Eve. They knew they were guilty, so they clothed themselves. Not everyone will receive the clothing of Christ. We make excuses for our sin. We blame other people. We say, "I'm not as bad as those people." The point is, you're a burnt stick. You're bad. Everyone needs redemption. If we grasp the idea of our union with Christ and our identification with Him—in both His death and His resurrection—Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "You will have discovered the most glorious truth you will ever know in your life."

Most Christians are miserable. Most Christians fall into sin because they are depressed, because they allow the devil to suppress them. When you read Zechariah 3, you're listening to His voice. It's our responsibility to take charge of whom we listen to. We need to immerse ourselves in His verdict of who we are. Spend your time memorizing and pondering the words God has spoken over you in His Word, because that's your only hope. The accusations and temptations will continue, but they no longer define or drive us. We have a Savior and Redeemer—and His promises are ours.

The case is closed. There's no higher court that can reverse the verdict. So all the accusations are no longer admissible. Regardless of what any lower court might rule, the verdict is final. No matter what your conscience may tell you, God's Word is final.

Spend time meditating on these truths. This is a good preparation for the Lord's Supper we're about to receive. Let's rejoice in these truths.

God, thank You—thank You—thank You! We can't thank You enough for the gospel, for the hope of Jesus Christ, Who knew no sin and yet for our sake became sin so we could become the righteousness of God. Thank You so much. Please let us each of us experience this at a deeper level today. Minister to each of us personally as we now take communion. We pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.

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