

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ZECHARIAH

Zechariah 3

The first six chapters of Zechariah present a number of visions. They are visions that inform us in a very visual way of what God is doing in the world. There is an old quip that says, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I don’t know if it is true, especially in the face of inflation, but I do know that the pictures presented in these visions are striking and they capture our attention and our imagination. That is what they are supposed to do.

The location for this vision is not given. It might be in the temple because there is a high priest. Or it might be a courtroom because there is an accuser. Instead of being told where the vision takes place, we are told who are the participants in the vision.

- First there is Joshua the high priest: *Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD (3:1).*

The high priest was the highest office in all of Israel. This vision is given at a time when there was no king in Israel. The land was ruled by a local governor who answered to the king of the Persian Empire. That meant that the high priest was the highest office in the land.

But we are not told that the vision entails merely the high priest. This is personal. He is named. It is Joshua the high priest. This is like the difference between having the picture of the president of the United States versus having the picture of President George W. Bush. This is not abstract. It is specific.

I think it is specific for a reason. It is specific because you are supposed to identify with this individual. It is not just any old high priest. It is the one you know by name.

Here is the point. It is that God knows you by name. He deals with nations and with kingdoms, but He also deals with individuals. There is coming a day when you must stand before the Lord and you will not be able to hide behind your pastor or your husband or your wife or your parents. You won’t be able to hide in a group. There is to be a judgment where every individual gives an answer before the holy God of the universe.

- Secondly there is Satan: *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 (3:1).*

Notice the role in which Satan is portrayed. He is here to accuse. We tend to think of Satan as though his primary role is that of temptation. We say, “The Devil made me do it.” But there is another role that is described in the Scripture. It is that of the accuser. Indeed, this is the meaning of the name Satan. The Hebrew text says that Satan was “standing at his right hand to SATAN him.”

Revelation 12:10 calls Satan the accuser of our brethren, who accuses them before our God day and night. It is not a pleasant thing to be accused and it is even worse to be accused day and night. But the worst thing of all is to be accused when that accusation is true. When people say bad things about you, just stop and think what they would say if they knew the truth.

- Thirdly there is the Angel of the Lord.

The Lord is seen in the persona of His messenger — He is termed here the angel of the Lord. When we hear the term “angel” we think immediately of one of those heavenly creations. The Biblical reference to an angel speaks primarily of a messenger. Sometimes it is a human messenger. Sometimes it is an angelic messenger. And sometimes, when we read of the Angel of the Lord, it is speaking of the ultimate messenger of God, the One who eventually became flesh and who became the ultimate communication of God’s message to men.

The reason I mention this is because this chapter contains a curious interplay between the angel of the Lord versus the Lord Himself. First we see Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord. Then we see the Lord Himself rebuking Satan and then still another reference to the angel of the Lord. It is through this interplay that a drama unfolds. It is a drama of hope.

THIS HOPE IS SEEN WHEN THE ACCUSER IS REBUKED

And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zechariah 3:2).

Jerusalem is described as “a brand plucked from the fire.” That sounds a bit odd to our ears, but it would have been familiar to the people addressed by Zechariah. One of their earlier prophets had coined this phrase to describe the people of God in such a way.

Amos 4 outlines the judgments of God upon the nation of Israel and throughout that chapter, the continuing refrain is that “you have not returned unto Me.” God says:

- I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places, yet you have not returned to Me (Amos 4:6).
- I withheld the rain and there was no water yet you have not returned to Me (Amos 4:8).
- I sent scorching wind and mildew insects to eat up your gardens and vineyards and trees, yet you have not returned to Me (Amos 4:9).
- I sent a plague that killed your young men and your horses until your land was filled with a stench, and still you have not returned to Me (Amos 4:10).

It is then that God says, *I overthrew you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, And you were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze; Yet you have not returned to Me," declares the LORD (Amos 4:11).*

Do you see it? The description of Jerusalem as a firebrand is a reference to God's judgment. A fire brand is a piece of wood that has already been set on fire. It has been burned. It is charred. It shows the effects of the fire.

I can identify with that. I've been to a lot of fires in the course of my career with the fire department, but only once was I actually on fire. It was during an especially nasty warehouse fire that myself and my teammates found ourselves on fire. It didn't last long, but it seemed like an eternity and the heat of the flames seemed to cut right through my protective fire fighting gear.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on my face outside the warehouse, my mask pulled half off and my helmet ripped away. I was told that I had been blown out of the building when it went up — tossed like a firebrand being tossed from a fire.

Jerusalem was like that firebrand. Zechariah writes to people who are living in the days following the Babylonian Captivity. They have returned to the land to find their city in ruins and they started the work of rebuilding, but the desolation remains.

And yet, God is going to do something wonderful with Jerusalem. This will be the scene of a work that will result in the rebuking of the accuser. Satan will meet his downfall through that which plays out at Jerusalem. Something will take place in Jerusalem that will overturn all of the works of Satan.

The works of Satan are pictured in verse 3.

THIS HOPE IS SEEN WHEN FILTH IS IN THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY

Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. (Zechariah 3:3).

There is an old saying that “clothes make the man.” It isn’t true. The reason I know it isn’t true is because man preceded clothing. In the Garden of Eden, there was man before there were clothes. While it is not true that clothes make the man, it IS true that clothing often serves to IDENTIFY the man.

We do that all the time. If I were to walk into this room in uniform, you would be able to identify me as a fire fighter. There would be a badge on my chest and insignias on my lapels and labels and patches that would identify my rank and the department for which I work. You would see those various items and you would come to the conclusion that I was a fire fighter.

Zechariah sees a similar sort of vision. He sees Joshua, the high priest, and the reason he recognizes Joshua the high priest is because he is wearing the garments of a high priest. But there is a problem. Those garments are dirty. They are not merely dirty, they are filthy. The Hebrew term here is specific. It is the term that is used for human excrement. This is filthy filth.

It is bad enough to have dirty clothes. It is even worse to have clothes that are covered with filth. But it is worse than that to have filthy garments when you are supposed to be wearing robes of the high priest and when you are standing before the angel of the Lord. We are meant to see the contrast between the filth of Joshua’s condition with the holiness of his position.

The high priest was to serve as the mediator between God and man. He represented the people to God. That is rather different than a prophet.

- A prophet represents God to the people. He is sent from God and he turns to the people and he speaks the words of God to the people. You listen to the prophet and you hear the message of God.
- A priest is just the opposite. He represents the people to God. He comes before God and he serves as the personal representative of the people.

That means the priest is there serving as your representative. You look at the priest and you see yourself. The actions of the priest are done on your behalf.

Naturally, we want our representatives to represent us in the best possible light. If clothing identifies the man, then we want the man who represents us to be dressed in the finest threads.

But that is not what we see in the vision. Joshua the high priest is dressed in clothing that is covered in filth. Verse 1 had Satan accusing the high priest and now we see that there was a basis for that accusation. The apparel of the high priest is filthy and this is representative of the filthiness that is to be found in those whom he represents.

This theme of inadequate apparel is one that goes back to the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve first ate of the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened and they saw their own nakedness and the inadequacy of that nakedness and their first instinct was to cover themselves. Operation figleaf. They tried their hand at manufacturing their own clothing and perhaps they even convinced themselves that no one would notice and then they heard the sound of the Lord God coming into the Garden and there was an instant of panic as they realized their own inadequacy.

I don't often have nightmares, but one that I have occasionally experienced is when I find myself inadequately dressed in a public place. I might be at work or at school or in church and I realize that I have forgotten to put on my pants. There is shame and a desire to cover up.

There is in all of us, to varying degrees, this same insecurity. Am I adequate? Am I dressed? Do I have that shameful part of myself covered? I am not talking about physical nakedness, though I suspect that most of us are not that proud of how we physically appear (otherwise the gyms and the spas would be out of business). I am speaking of our inner selves and the things we do to cover up.

It invariably involves a focus upon the exterior. What we do. What we say. How we act. Fig leaves of externality that are carefully sewn into the fabric of our lives to cover our shame.

It is at the same time our deepest longing and also our deepest fear that someone might come to know the real person inside — the real me with all of my filthiness and insecurity and shame.

- It is a longing because we live lives of loneliness and we long to be known.
- It is a fear because we are afraid that anyone who really knows us will see the filthiness within and will reject us.

I was reading an online article in the Caltech Counseling page that described what they called an “imposter syndrome” — people who have feelings of inadequacy. The article

pointed out that it is not merely the mediocre or the losers who have this experience. Often it is people who are very outwardly successful who wrestle with such feelings of inward inadequacy.

These longings and fears are answered at the cross. This is seen in the cleansing that is provided from the Lord.

THIS HOPE IS SEEN WHEN THE UNCLEAN IS CLEANSED

⁴ And he spoke and said to those who were standing before him saying, "Remove the filthy garments from him." Again he said to him, "See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes." ⁵ Then 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, while the angel of the LORD was standing by. (Zechariah 3:4-5).

The provision is announced by the angel of the Lord. The garments of filth are to be removed and replaced with festal robes. This was foreshadowed in the Garden of Eden. When the fig leaves proved inadequate to the task, the Lord Himself provided garments of skin. There is something unsaid but assumed in the book of Genesis about that provision. Those new garments came at the cost of a life.

In order to clothe the nakedness of Adam and Eve, God provided clothing of animal skin and that assumes that an animal was put to death. This was a prophetic picture, a type of what Christ would ultimately do on our behalf. His death upon the cross in our place, suffering the death that we deserved, results in our being clothed in His righteousness.

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (1 Corinthians 5:21).

When we come to Jesus Christ in faith, believing that our sins were credited to Him upon the cross and claiming through faith that provision on our behalf, we find that the very righteousness of Christ has been credited to us. Like Joshua the high priest, our filthy garments have been taken away and replaced by clean robes of righteousness.

THIS HOPE RESULTS IN NEW CLOTHES AND A NEW CALLING

⁶ And the angel of the LORD admonished Joshua saying, ⁷ "Thus

says the LORD of hosts, 'If you will walk in My ways, and if you will perform My service, then you will also govern My house and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who are standing here. (Zechariah 3:6-7).

The cleansing provided in this passage is not an end unto itself. It contains a call to action. This is the “so what” of the passage.

Notice that the cleansing is not predicated on the calling. It is not that you will be cleaned if you perform. He does not say, “Straighten up your life and change your clothes and then I will cleanse you.” First we see the cleansing; then we see a call to action on how we are to live as a result of that cleansing.

At the same time, we do a disservice if we do not point out that cleansing is for the purpose of doing a clean work. The Lord says, “I cleaned you in order to give you a service of work that demanded clean hands and a pure heart.”

What is the work that is described? It is the work of a priest. It is the work of worship. It is the work of coming into the presence of God and bringing others into that same presence.

THIS HOPE IS FOUNDED ON THE PROMISE OF A PRIEST

8 'Now listen, Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who are sitting in front of you-- indeed they are men who are a symbol, for behold, I am going to bring in My servant the Branch. 9 For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; on one stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave an inscription on it,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. (Zechariah 3:8-9).

This is the explanation of the vision of this chapter. We are told that this vision of Joshua the high priest is a symbol and that it is meant to point us to something that God was going to do in the future.

You need to remember that this was written 500 years before Jesus was born. Those who want to teach that Jesus was just a good teacher and who was misunderstood by His followers and who was deified by later church counsels conveniently ignore the fact that the Old Testament tells us all about the Messiah and what He would accomplish a long time before Jesus was even born. That prophecy is given here in three parts:

1. The Branch: *I am going to bring in My servant the Branch (3:8).*

When you think of a branch, that is a part of a tree. But the Biblical picture of this branch is a bit different.

We have a large oak tree in our front yard. When Hurricane Wilma hit last year, a large section of the tree snapped off from the main trunk. It split the tree so that there was now a large open space in the middle. In order to prevent dry rot from setting in, that portion of the main trunk was cut away, leaving a large stump in the middle of the tree. Paula looked at it and said, "It has ruined our tree." But I said, "Just wait and watch; there will eventually grow from that stump a new branch." I want you to know that it has happened. What started as a sprout has continued to grow and is now showing leaves.

As Zechariah shares this message, the nation of Israel was a tree that had been cut down. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The people of God had been scattered. Even now with the return to the land, the work of rebuilding the temple had not yet been completed.

But there is going to be a Branch that will sprout up. New life is going to arise from what looked to be a dead stump.

That is a picture that is supposed to stay with you...

- When your life comes crashing down.
- When you feel as though you are going to snap.
- When you are filled with the deadness of daily humdrum.

There is a source of life that can sprout up with new hope. Jesus is the Branch and that name is full of irony because the means through which He brought life was to give up His own life by being nailed to a tree. He is the branch who was nailed to a tree.

2. The Stone: *For behold, the stone that I have set before Joshua; on one stone are seven eyes (3:9).*

At first glance, this description looks weird. But it isn't supposed to be. The symbolism is rather simple. The picture of seven eyes is merely a reference to the fact that God has perfect vision — He sees everything.

It is the same symbolism that is seen in Revelation 5:6 when John sees *a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.*

The lamb in Revelation 5 is a picture of Jesus and the stone here in Zechariah 3 is also a picture of Jesus. The Old Testament had already described Him as the Stone that the builders rejected (Psalm 118:22) who would become the foundation stone upon which God would establish His people.

3. The Inscription: *Behold, I will engrave an inscription on it,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day (3:9).*

What is this inscription? I don't know. The passage does not say. What it does do is to link the inscription with the removal of iniquity. Notice how the prophecy does this. God says that He will do two things:

- *I will engrave an inscription on it.*
- *I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.*

It seems to me that the second part of this promise helps to explain the first part. There is something about this engraved inscription that results in the removal of the iniquity. I'm reminded of something the Lord said to Isaiah, "Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:16).

What are the marks on the palms of the hands of Jesus? They are the marks of His love for us. They are the marks that removed the iniquity in one day.

Has your name been inscribed on the palms of His hands? Have you come to Him in faith, trusting in that which was accomplished on your behalf?

I am assured that most of you have done this already. But you are called always to come back to the cross and to be reminded of the forgiveness that was purchased for you. It is a call to drink deeply of the wellspring of hope. Hope for the new year and hope for God's continuing faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to you.