

Rags to riches

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to Zechariah chapter 3. We've read the chapter. I introduced it briefly before the reading. We've got a vision here, a vision that was granted to Zechariah, the prophet, a vision for Zechariah, a vision that he in turn would share with the people and as God has preserved His Word. So, this evening we too can see this vision and learn from it.

Just to give a little bit of the background as to when this takes place, Zechariah was a prophet following the return of the people from exile in Babylon, or in any case, some of those who returned from exile in Babylon, returned to Jerusalem. Some of you may remember we went through Zechariah at the neighborhood fellowships and did one of the study guides. So, some of this may ring a bell. Of course, this historical background is common to many of the books in the Old Testament that deal with that post-exilic period in Israel's history. So, the people returned to Jerusalem, and they returned with great rejoicing. There was great enthusiasm. There was great expectation that they would once again be the nation they once were, the glory days of David and Solomon. And though the beginning was very humble, there was this great hope that things would change for the better. But the years passed and things did not improve. And when this vision comes to Zechariah, maybe some 20 years have passed since the return, and really the people are very discouraged. Jerusalem has not been rebuilt as they had hoped. The temple has not been rebuilt. And there is this general sense of discouragement and dejection among the people. They are a saved people, but we might say that they are a sad people, even though they had experienced God's saving hand, delivering them from slavery and captivity in Babylon. Well, this is roughly when Zechariah is granted this vision. Now, before we consider the vision and go through it really just as we have it in the order that it's there in the chapter, before we think about the actors, those involved, I think in the outline that you have, that's where it appears we're going to begin. But we're going to take a step back before we think about the actors. We're just going to notice the scene or the stage where the action unfolds in the vision itself. You know, where is this happening where we meet the angel of the Lord and the high priest Joshua and Satan? You know, where are they when this vision unfolds? Well, the scene is the temple. And without, I think, undue speculation, we could identify even more precisely that it's the holy of holiest thing that the holy of holiest thing. And the holy of holiest thing that the holy of holies is the holy of holiest thing. And not only the scene, but the occasion. Again, it seems very reasonable to come to the conclusion that this vision is depicting the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, there in the temple, there in the holy of holiest, when the high priest once a year would come before God to make atonement for the people, to intercede on behalf of the people.

The scene that is depicted by this vision. There was no more solemn day in the calendar of Israel than this day depicted in this vision. Who are there? Well, we're told there in verse 1, then he showed me Joshua the high priest. Zechariah sees Joshua the high priest. Now, Joshua was a historical figure.

He is spoken of in Haggai as one of those who returned from exile. He was, as he's described, as the high priest. So, it's a vision, but the vision incorporates this real, live person who Zechariah knew. You could recognize him.

Oh, there's Joshua, the high priest. He's in this vision. So, he's one of those who is present. Now, what's very important for us, the very outset here as we think about this vision, critical, is to be very clear that Joshua is the high priest, and so he is where he is in representation of the people. Yes, he is a man. He has a name, but he is where he is, representing others, representing the people of God there in the Holy of Holies on this solemn day.

[5 : 21] Let me put it more vividly, so that as we go through the vision, this, I trust, will impact very personally on you. We can say this, Joshua is you. You're Joshua, because he was there

representing God's people, and so Joshua is you.

Have that very much in mind as we continue through the vision. Maybe this can stick in your mind, a phrase that has come up over the last couple of years in very sad circumstances.

How about using this to get it really engraved in your mind? Je suis Joshua. Tu es Joshua. Joshua is you.

So, he's one of the actors here in this vision. The next one who we're presented with is, well, not the next one in order, but the next one we'll mention is Satan. Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan standing at his right side.

Satan, as his very name indicates, the adversary or the accuser, and he's also there. And when we appreciate the scene that has been depicted, there's almost a sense of scandal.

[6 : 38] What is he doing there in the holy of holies? Satan in the holy of holies. There's a contradiction. There's a sense that that ought not to be.

And yet, there he is in the holy of holies. Satan is there. He's a trespasser, but he's there. He has no business there, but he's there.

His very presence, profoundly offensive. But he is there doing what he does, accusing God's people.

And very particularly, as we're told, very explicitly accusing Joshua, Satan standing at his right side to accuse him, to accuse the high priest.

Well, he's the second actor. But then we have another character, another actor in the vision. And that is the one described as the angel of the Lord. Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord.

[7 : 36] Now, the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament is a mysterious character. But the biblical evidence that we won't present this evening for reasons of time allows us to conclude with great confidence that the angel of the Lord can be identified with the Lord himself.

And there are any number of reasons for coming to that conclusion that, as I say, we won't run through this moment. But for the purposes of our consideration of this vision, just take it on trust. Many of you, you won't need to take it on trust because you're persuaded of this. But that the angel of the Lord can be identified with the Lord himself. Now, we said the scene is the temple, the Holy of Holies and the Day of Atonement.

And yet, the characters that we've identified and the action described, Satan accusing Joshua, almost paints for us a parallel picture of a courtroom scene.

You've got Joshua, the accused. You've got Satan, the accuser, the prosecutor. And then you have the judge who has to determine on what is being said by the accuser.

[8 : 56] I don't think that is the scene being portrayed, but it adds an element of that in it. We can maybe combine the two pictures and speak of a legal case being fought in the very Holy of Holies as the high priest goes to do his business before God.

They're the actors. But we continue with the vision and we think about the accusation because there at the very beginning, we're told that this is what Satan is doing. Satan's standing at Joshua's right side to accuse him.

What is the content of the accusation? Well, we're not told. We're not told what he says. We're not told what it is that he accuses Joshua of.

And we might say, well, why not? Why aren't we told the nature of the accusation? Well, the answer to that question is a very simple one. It's not necessary for the content of the accusation to be recorded because it's there for all to see.

Joshua is filthy. No more needs to be said. You don't need a big legal case. It's there for anybody who sees to recognize of what Joshua can be accused.

[10 : 17] He's filthy. Now, Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. Now, we need to take a bit of a step back here to try and appreciate the impact of this scene.

We need to understand how the high priest was to present himself before God in the Holy of Holies. And this is just a little bit of background, which I hope will help us just appreciate what a scandalous scene is being depicted here in the vision.

What would happen, what was required of the high priest as the Day of Atonement was being approached, is that a week before the day, the high priest was put in seclusion.

Now, why was that? Well, the reason for that is so that in the course of that week, he would not even accidentally touch or eat anything unclean.

Clean food was brought to him. He'd wash his body and prepare his heart. The night before the solemn day, he didn't rest.

[11 : 27] He stayed up all night praying and reading God's Word to prepare himself for what the following day awaited. Then on the day, the very day itself, he bathed head to toe and dressed in pure unstained white linen.

Then he went into the Holy of Holies and offered an animal sacrifice to God to atone for his own sins. This is the first thing he did on that day.

Then he would come out of the Holy of Holies and he would bathe from head to toe again and be dressed again in a new set of white, pure, clean, unstained linen.

Then he went back into the Holy of Holies and offered a sacrifice, this time for the priests, to atone for their sin. Then what did he do? Well, you can work it out. What did he do next?

He would come out and once again, he would go through the same ritual of bathing from head to toe and being clothed again in a clean set of white linen.

[12 : 40] He would return to the Holy of Holies and sacrifice for the sins of the people. It was a remarkable and meticulous ritual.

What was his purpose? Well, the purpose of it all would be or was that the priest, as he entered in to perform this duty, would be in as much as it was humanly possible, immaculate.

I don't know if they had Mr. Man in Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. But if they did, then the high priest on that day was Mr. Clean.

He was Mr. Immaculate. He was Mr. Spotless. There was no cleaner man in the whole of the land than this man. I think you get the picture.

But what are we told about Joshua, the high priest? What is it that Zechariah sees in the vision of Joshua? We're told that he was dressed in filthy clothes.

[13 : 46] And the translation that we have is overly sanitized. The language used by Zechariah in describing what he sees is crude language.

We might even say vulgar language. Let me get you or help you get a visual image of what Joshua looked like in the vision. You must have seen, I'm sure most of you have seen Shawshank Redemption.

It's been on, I don't know how many times. Some of you have seen it multiple times. Can you remember Andy Dupre? After many years in prison, and he has this great escape plan.

You can picture the scene. And when the time comes for him to escape, he makes his way through the sewers of the prison to get to freedom. You can picture the scene.

I'm sure many of you, some of you are thinking, what's that about? I've never seen the film. Well, I'm sorry. But those of you who have. And what's he doing? What's he going through in the sewers? What's he doing? What's he surrounded by in the sewers?

[14 : 52] Well, if you can picture that, then this is what you have here. This is Joshua smeared in human excrement. He is disgusting. It is a revolting picture that has been painted of Joshua the high priest.

All the more revolting when we appreciate what the high priest was meant to look like as he entered into the Holy of Holies. You see, this is beyond scandalous.

You simply can't stand before God covered in human excrement. You just can't do that. And so we come back to the accusation.

What is the accusation? You see, all Satan needs to do. It's so easy for Satan. So easy. All he needs to do is say to Joshua, just look at yourself.

That's all he needs to do. Just look at yourself. He doesn't need to have a long, charred sheet. You did this and you did this and you failed to do this. No. All he needs to do is say, just look at yourself, man.

[16 : 05] You're disgusting. You're revolting. What are you doing here in the Holy of Holies? Look at you. In fact, he wouldn't even need to say, look at yourself. Just smell yourself.

And the accusation would have come down and pierced Joshua's soul. But remember what we said about Joshua.

He's a representative. Joshua is you. And so when we appreciate that and we see him in all his vulgarity, in all his filth, what we need to appreciate is that that's you, that that's me.

We are the ones standing there, to use a phrase that is particularly appropriate, stinking to high heaven. What is the meaning or the purpose of this disgusting scene?

Well, God was giving Zechariah a prophetic vision so that he could see himself and all of God's people as God sees us in our sin. In spite of all our efforts to be pure and good and moral, we are filthy.

[17 : 28] God sees our heart and he sees hearts full of filth. We are unclean on the inside. We don't see it in all its horror.

Others don't see it, but God sees it. And Joshua here represents that spiritual reality. Well, that's the accusation, but let's move on to the defense because Joshua is defended.

The evidence for the prosecution, if we use the language of the courtroom, though it's not really a courtroom, but the language or the evidence is overwhelming. And yet the Lord leaps to Joshua's defense.

We might say, well, what about Joshua? Has he got nothing to say for himself? No, he has nothing to say for himself. He has nothing to say in his defense. He is altogether silent. He could be nothing other than silent.

Dressed as he is, what could he possibly say to Satan? He couldn't say to Satan, no, you can't say that to me. I'm the high priest. No, he knows that the accusation is altogether valid.

[18 : 32] So he can't defend himself, but the Lord defends him. And how does he defend him?

Well, the Lord's defense is grounded in two realities concerning Joshua and God's people.

They're revealed by two verbs that the Lord employs in the defense that he makes of Joshua.

Notice there in verse 2, the Lord said to Satan, the Lord rebuke you, Satan.

The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. Is not this man, Joshua, a burning stick or ember snatched from the fire? Two verbs there, chosen and snatched.

And notice that it's Jerusalem that God describes as chosen. But Joshua belongs to Jerusalem.

Joshua represents Jerusalem.

Of course, what this also brings to light regarding Satan's accusation is that his accusation against Joshua, in effect, is also, perhaps even more principally, but certainly also an accusation against God because it is God who has chosen Jerusalem.

[19 : 42] It's God who has chosen Joshua as part of Jerusalem. And so when Satan attacks

Joshua, he is attacking the one who chose Joshua.

You can maybe think of a somewhat trivial illustration of that. We're on the eve of the Euros. I don't know, two or three weeks they begin, and soon the squads will be announced, the final squads.

You can imagine the pundits discussing who has been chosen. Let's imagine the England squad, and the names come out. Who are the final chosen players? You get Gary Lineker saying, well, that player, he's useless.

He shouldn't be there. He's had a useless season. He's not good enough. He's not up to the standard. Who is he attacking? Well, there's a sense in which he's attacking the player, but beyond that, he's really attacking the manager because it's the manager who chose this useless player.

And when Satan accuses Joshua, he's accusing God, which partly explains why God leaps to the defense not only of Joshua, but of his own divine prerogative to choose whom he chooses to, save whom he chooses to save.

[20 : 49] It's the Lord's prerogative, and we thank God for it, to choose a filthy people for himself.

He chose Joshua, and he has chosen us. Chosen, but also snatched. Notice that in defending Joshua, he describes him as a man or a burning stick snatched from the fire.

Now, it's not altogether clear what this is a reference to. It may be a reference to the liberation of God's people from Babylon. They were there, captive in Babylon, exiled by God because of their own rebellion.

Their time in Babylon was an act of God's judgment on his own people. He used Babylon, but this was an act of judgment. Of course, it just reminds us that God knows how sinful and rebellious his people are.

He exiled them to Babylon because of how rebellious they were. And yet, the very one who exiles them is the one who graciously snatches them from that place of danger and judgment and brings them back home to Jerusalem.

[22 : 00] An ember snatched from the fire. This is Joshua. This is us. You are Joshua. Joshua.

But then, following the defense, you have another aspect to this, and we have to move quickly on, and that is the transformation that takes place of Joshua.

Joshua, as we see in the vision, is the passive object of a remarkable transformation that involves two elements. It involves removing the filthy rags and putting on fine vestments or fine, rich garments.

And it's clear there, the picture is an easy one to visualize. The filthy rags are removed. Joshua is left naked, but spotlessly clean. In the vision itself, it explains what that means.

His sins are forgiven, each and every one of them, as the filthy rags are removed. Satan is left without ammunition to accuse him. What can he accuse him of?

[23 : 07] He is spotless. You are Joshua. But he does remain naked. Spotless, but naked.

And so what then happens? Well, having removed the filthy rags, orders are given that Joshua be clothed with rich garments. They're not only spotless garments, but they are regal in character. They are precious and striking and grant to the wearer a presence and a dignity. And these garments, they represent a righteousness that Joshua is clothed with, a righteousness not his own, but one given to him by God.

And remember, you are Joshua. But the vision continues. Having been clothed with these fine garments, he is then given a commission, a task.

And there are consequences of it there in verses 6 and 7. The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua. This is what the Lord Almighty says. If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among those standing here.

[24 : 18] What is Joshua to do now that he is clothed as he is? Well, he is to walk in the ways of the Lord. He is to keep God's requirements.

In the measure that he does so, he will be given a place or access to the very presence of God. And yet, even as we think about this vision, that kind of introduces a problem.

Because we think, well, yes, Joshua, his filthy rags have been removed. He has been clothed with these fine garments. But now he is being asked to live a perfect life, to walk in the ways of the Lord. And Joshua would not be able to fulfill this commission. He might, with great effort and sincerity, seek to do so, but he would fail. He was incapable of living a sinless life.

And so he's given this commission, yet there's a sense in which it's a commission he's not going to be able to fulfill. And that reality leads us on to what follows in the vision, what we might call the explanation of the vision.

[25 : 26] There's already been elements of explanation, even within what we've seen so far. But from verse 8, there's this very clear explanation given. Verses 8 and 9.

Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come. See, already you have this explanation given to the actors in the vision, Joshua and the other priests.

And what are they told? They're told, you are symbolic of things to come. Well, of what things to come? What are they pointing to or who are they pointing to?

Well, it becomes clear who Joshua in particular points to. You are men symbolic of things to come. And then God says, I am going to bring my servant, the branch.

And these titles, two titles there, my servant, the branch. They're messianic titles. God is saying that Joshua points forward to Jesus. He points forward to the Messiah.

[26 : 32] And there's further explanation when we're told of the mission of this Messiah who will come. For there we read in verse 9, there at the end of the verse, and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

Joshua points to Messiah. He's a symbol of things to come. The one who is to come is identified as God's servant, as the branch. And we're told what he will do.

He will be the means of removing the sin of the land in one day. And it's so clear who Joshua points forward to. Who is God's servant? Who is the branch?

Who will remove the sin of the land in one day? A greater Joshua. Yeshua. Jesus. And of course, in the fullness of time, the day came, Jesus handed himself over to death as a perfect and sufficient, spotless sin offering.

He himself, as the priest, was perfect and spotless. And as the one who was both priest and sacrifice, perfect and spotless.

[27 : 41] And so as he died in our place, he removed the sin of the land in one day. The sin of the generations that had gone before and that would follow, removed in one day by this perfect,

impeccable, immaculate sacrifice.

And it is, of course, in the grounds of this work of Jesus that Joshua's filthy rags can be removed, that he can be clothed in rich clothes, clothed with the imputed righteousness of Jesus.

That takes us to the very end of the vision. And we close by seeing how it ends in verse 10. In that day, each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under the divine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty.

What is the outcome of the work of Messiah? Well, some of that we've already noticed. But here in this verse, you have this picture painted that maybe is, if we had to describe it in one word, the word would be shalom.

This is a picture that is painted of peace and tranquility and safety. You can just imagine this scene. It's an idyllic scene of a man sitting under his vine and fig tree, under the shade and protection of it. [29 : 15] It speaks of provision, of prosperity, of safety, of contentment. It's a picture that speaks of all our spiritual blessings in God's servant, in the branch, in Messiah Jesus.

We are safe. We are secure. We are at home. We are happy. We are blessed. But notice what those so blessed do because it's striking what the vision describes those so blessed as doing. It's at the very heart of this final verse. In that day, each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree. It doesn't say each of you will sit under your vine and fig tree. It says you will invite your neighbor to join with you the blessings that you enjoy. You will seek to share with others that others would know that blessing, that safety, that security, that protection that you know and that you experience.

You are Joshua. You are blessed. It is for you as one richly blessed to invite others to share in the rich blessings secured by our Yeshua, by our Jesus.

[30 : 43] Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the manner in which you declare great and glorious truths in any number of ways that would help us better understand who you are and what you have done for us.

We thank you for this vision. We thank you for the way that it presents to us in such vivid terms, in such scandalous terms, in such revolting terms, our own sinful condition.

And we thank you also for the glorious way in which it presents all that we can know and experience and enjoy because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done and how our filthy razz can be removed and how we can be clothed in rich garments and know and experience and enjoy the multiple blessings of being in Christ Jesus.

And so we pray that you would help us to enjoy our inheritance, that we would know what it is to rest under the vine and the fig tree and that we would know what it is to invite others to join us.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.