

Jacob London. New Horizon United Reformed Church. June 20, 2021

A Vision of our Justification

Zechariah 3. Lord's Day 23

Dear Congregation,

In this fourth vision in the book of Zechariah we are given insight into the heavenly courtroom. Much like in the opening chapters in the book of Job we see how God administers his sovereign power and justice to those who stand before him.

Zechariah is one of the three preachers who are given by God to the Old Testament church, along with Haggai and Malichi, as they return from their Babylonian exile to Israel and Israel's religion. Zechariah was sent to encourage the church for in their return they faced much opposition from other nations, confusion amongst themselves, and difficulties. Yet even more detrimental than these things was Israel's sins.

God had made unto them wonderful promises concerning their future but they were in no position to receive them. Not because of any nation, culture, or persons but because of sin. Thus when the faithful looked to their circumstances, the opposition of the world, the flesh, and the devil they could find no hope of redemption. This can become a common experience in our day, we see the world's opposition to the church - pastor's moral failings - denominations once bastions of truth, liberalizing - churches closings, ect.. We too can become so preoccupied with our circumstances and sins that we too lose the hope that God will prevail and his kingdom succeed.

This vision shows us the condition of all who stand before God, but also that there is a God-appointed and God-accepted priesthood to mediate for us on our behalf. That his church would know that their enemy is not any particular nation, culture, or persons, but Satan. And God has overcome all wickedness and defends his people by the righteousness of Christ.

Thesis: By the righteousness of Christ we are vindicated, cleansed, and received by God.

Headings:

1. Jesus represents us in his righteousness (vv.1-3; #59)
2. Jesus cleanses us in his righteousness (vv. 4-7; #60)
3. Resting in the Righteousness Jesus (vv.8-10; #61)

Point 1: Jesus represents us in his righteousness (vv.1-3; #59)

The aim of our catechism in question 59 is to show that it is God who justifies. We are then not justified because he renders us righteous by the infusion of faith, love, and good works. On the contrary we are said to be justified by judicial (legal) sentence "*before God*". That is that he absolves us of our guilt of sins "*in Christ...*" and accepts us as righteous "*to life everlasting*". We see this judicial action vividly on display in Zechariah 3.

The vision focuses on the heavenly courtroom with three participants. First we see Joshua the high priest (*the accused*), second, the angel of the Lord (*The judge*), and third, Satan (*The accuser*), and Zechariah is watching.

1.1 - Joshua the high priest - The accused

The first character that we are introduced to in this vision is Joshua. "*Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord...*" (v.1). Joshua of course was the successor to Moses and the leader of Israel into the promised land. Joshua is known in the scriptures as being a high water mark for fidelity to the LORD and removing impurities from the people of God. We are told that he is *the high priest*. Of course we know that the Joshua that is described to us in the book of Joshua was not a high priest, but he is given this title in this vision to encapsulate the whole of who he represents. The office of the high priest did not only represent the whole of the priesthood but the whole of the people, it is clear then that Joshua stands on behalf of the whole nation. He represents the best of the people of God in this vision.

The problem with Joshua is that he is not adorned in the majesty of the high priestly garments, but he was "*clothed with filthy garments*" (v.3). The word filthy here is a very strong word expressive of utterly disgusting muck. Some have suggested the word refers to being 'smeared with human excrement'. This is not the way a high priest was to appear, "*And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty*" (Ex 28:2). No high priest would ever dare appear before God in such a filthy way. This is a vision, and Joshua's filthiness is symbolic of the spiritual condition of himself and the people.

This scene represented a matter that would have been on the minds of the people of Israel. The nation had fallen into sin, that's why they were in exile! They were disgraced in failure during their exile. They would have been pondering their sins both nationally and individually. Thus, if God rejected Joshua then, if he was rebuked and cast away, the significance is that the people of Israel would also be rebuked and cast away.

1.2 - Satan - The accuser

The second participant in this vision is Satan, our accuser. “*Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him*” (v.1b). The scriptures say many things about this devil. He is a deceiver (Gen. 3:4), a tempter (Matt.4:3), a roaring and devouring lion (1 Pet. 5:8), a persecutor (Rev. 2:10), and a murderer (John 8:44). Yet in this vision we see that he is also the one who accuses the elect of their sins. He stands beside God’s people, the very ones he desires to lead into sin, and then acts shocked at the sins they commit.

Joshua is charged as the high priest to pray, intercede, and usher God’s people into his presence in worship. And it is God’s desire in their return to Israel that true religion might once again be established in Jerusalem. God desires fellowship and union with his people. Satan opposes God’s work by way of accusation.

Accusation is a potent weapon in Satan’s arsenal. I am sure you have experienced this feeling. Maybe there was something you were passionate about for the Lord, your work, or family and instead of someone recognizing that passion and encouraging it, they bring up past failures. What does this do to you and your passion? It discourages and deters us from our work. And so it is with Satan’s accusations! He seeks to discourage Joshua’s spiritual work as high priest due to his sins. In so doing he cuts the cord of our faith. It is as if he whispers into our ears, “You are no saint”... “Others are surely worthy of God, but not you...”, “Why don’t you just give up on salvation and enjoy the pleasures of sin”... Simply put Satan accuses Joshua that he is unfit to stand before the Lord and worship him.

We should also notice the silence of Joshua... He has nothing to say in defense of himself and his people. Because so often Satan’s charges against us are true. Though he is a liar, he often accuses us about the reality of who we are. It is as Charles Spurgeon said,

“Truly, dear friend, if Satan wanted to accuse us, any page of our history, and hour of any day will furnish him material for his charges... If the old accuser wants reasons for accusation he may indeed find as many as he wills, and continue to accuse as long as he pleases, for we are altogether as an unclean thing”.¹

1.3 - The LORD - The Judge

The accuser has a strong case, however before he is even able to present his evidence, he is ruled out of order. The third participant in this vision is the LORD, before Satan can state his case the Lord says, “*The Lord rebuke you, Satan!*”. The word rebuke used here is a strong word, the same word God used to rebuke the waters of the Red Sea that they might travel on dry ground. The Lord does not merely rebuke the accuser’s case and find it wanting. Rather, he rules that any possible evidence that might be brought is inadmissible. No charge whatsoever can be brought against Joshua because the Lord himself “*has chosen Jerusalem*” not that Jerusalem has chosen Jehovah, it is not the *burning brand* that plucks the hand, but the hand that plucks the brand. What this means is that God from eternity past has chosen to justify his people (Eph. 1:4,5). “Though their sins offend me, though they are on the broad road to sin and destruction, I have set my love upon them and am determined to justify them”.

Though Jerusalem, the people of God who Joshua represents, are all covered in their sins, God says “I have chosen them in spite of this sin, not that they would continue in it, but that they should be saved from it”. It is God who speaks up, it is God who defends his chosen people.

Notice that is not that Joshua is found not guilty, or that God is looking the other way from Israel’s sins, but he is *judicially* declared immune from prosecution. That is, that no matter what Satan may bring against God’s people it will not change his opinion of them. No one shall bring a charge against God’s elect so long as they are justified in his sight (Rom. 8:33).

Application:

1. So brothers and sisters, don’t we often make too much of Satan’s accusations? In this vision he was not even given a moment to speak, yet we often let Satan speak to our hearts about our shortcomings and sins. Though it is true, we are sinners, he twists that truth to lie to us that God does not care or love his church. We should not meditate on Satan’s lies but instead choose to meditate on God’s truth. That, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life*”. It **helps** us to believe that God’s word is true.

Point 2: Jesus cleanses us in his righteousness (vv. 4-7; #60)

Brothers and sisters it is not enough for us to simply be declared to be the people of God but God must also deal with the filthiness of our sins. Remember that God is so holy that he can not be in the presence of sins (Hab. 1:13), so our sins need to be dealt with in a radical way. Thus when our catechism asks, **60. How are you righteous before God?** It is asking, how are your sins atoned for? How are we able to stand before God? How are you and I an heir to everlasting life? **Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.** That is, that our

¹Zechariah, Richard D. Phillips

right standing before God goes beyond vindication, and a judicial pronouncement, to the application of Jesus righteousness by faith. You see, we have already soiled our garments, they are already ruined, but Jesus in his grace takes our ruined garments and gives us his pure robes.

2.1 - Jesus' pure robes make me free from sins

This transaction is crucial because Joshua is in fact, guilty as charged. He has grievously sinned against all God's commandments, he has kept none of them, he is inclined towards evil so what God must do is cleanse Joshua of his iniquity.

"Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him" (Zec. 3:4a). That is not only to change his outward appearance, the posture of his body, but his spiritual standing (Isa. 11:5; 61:10). This teaches us the first aspect of divine grace in the life of a believer, (1) that when God forgives our sins he takes our iniquity from us. He removes Joshua's sin and shame. And second, (2) we are clothed with *pure vestments*.

"See, I have removed your iniquity from you," Even though the filthy garments deserve the strongest condemnation and judgement. That is what we deserve, but the council responded in the defense of the accused, that "I have borne all the punishment in the place of the accused, I have fulfilled all the commandments in his place, and I give him my holiness and cover his evil". That is the *pure vestments*.

What this tells us is that the speaker in verse 4, the Angel, is after all the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). This is the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not proceed to dismiss or minimize the disruption and pollution caused by sin, but rather to deal with it effectively.

How does Christ effectively deal with our sins? The first aspect of Christ work the catechism mentions is the **perfect satisfaction** of Christ. This refers to Christ bearing the punishment of sins in our place (Passive obedience). Sin cannot go unpunished, and so Christ in his unsearchable grace bears the wrath of God for us in his person that we would be spared from eternal condemnation. Christ was also **righteous** in our place, that is that he lived a perfect life in complete conformity to the demands of God's Law. Never disobeying, always loving the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength (Active obedience). He is also **holy**, he was entirely consecrated to God's service, always living in conformity to his will.

Where we were condemned to die, he took our place. Where we failed, Jesus succeeded. When we sin, Jesus was obedient. **God grants and credits to me** all of this, and looks upon that person clothed with the *rich robes* as if they had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if they had been perfectly obedient. Jesus' pure robes are what makes us free from sin.

2.2 - Jesus' pure robes make me a friend of God

Now this declaration uses language that suggests that Joshua's sense of the guilt of sin had been a burden and was weighing him down. But now that it is declared removed he knows where he stands in relation to God and is able to serve him effectively.

The official dress of the high priest had been divinely given to show their dignity and honour (Ex. 28). The stains on his garments before would have disqualified him for his task in the presence of God. The term *pure vestments* indicates not only a change in his appearance but that he is now properly clad for his task as priest. Not only is he accepted, but he is also equipped for his role.

Thus he is charged to "*If you will walk in My ways, And if you will keep My command, Then you shall also judge My house, And likewise have charge of My courts*" (v.7a). He is called to fulfill his duties as priest, and ensure that covenant worship is pure and undefiled. That is that he is restored to his office, so to are we in the act of regeneration restored to worshipers of God. And if he does this the reward for Joshua is "*I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here*" (v.7b). He is promised direct communication with God. That he will not be on his own: he can take his concerns to the Lord and expect to be heard, he can expect to receive guidance and direction from heaven. The Lord will not be silent or distant any longer to those who are justified in his sight.

Application

1. The word sin denotes what has been twisted or bent away from the truth, as well as the guilt that comes from sin (Ps. 32:5), and the punishment for sins. The declaration here spoke powerfully to Josua and the situation of those returning from exile. What matters is not where they had been or what they had done, but what God had done and what he thought of them. Thus when Satan whispers in our ears of our shortcomings, let us rebuke him and meditate on that which we are by grace, *washed, sanctified, and justified by Christ* (1 Cor. 6:11).
2. The catechism says, **We must accept the gift with a believing heart**. Ursinus, the principal author of the catechism says there is a dual application to the righteousness of Christ. First, God must apply it to us. Second, we must apply it to ourselves. That is, that we must believe and use this truth.

Point 3: Resting in the Righteousness Jesus (vv.8-10; #61)

Joshua not only teaches us the principles of our justification, but also that we are called to rest and trust in the Christ to come.

“*Hear, O Joshua, the high priest, You and your companions who sit before you, For they are a wondrous sign; For behold, I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH*” (v.8).

3.1 - The Branch

This is a term used often in the scriptures to speak of the future Davidic King. Thirty one times in the Bible it is used to refer to David, and twice used in the 2 Samuel 7 and the giving of the David promise. *That there would come one to sit on David's throne forever.*

The context of our passage should not be missed. The people of Israel expected from the Davidic line a royal deliverer. That hope was absolutely dashed on the rocks in exile, surely Nebuchadnezzar cannot be our king! In their exile the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all likened the house of David to a mighty tree that was cut down in their deportation from the promised land.

Yet from this hewn down tree a new growth would come that would surpass the Davidic Kingdom's glory. This 'shoot' or 'branch' refers to a Davidic king of humble origin who would usher in the kingdom of God with all of its blessings.

What is God saying here?

1. Even in God's judgement (exile & the hewn down tree) his good purposes for the church shall prevail.
2. All of the promises in the scriptures shall never fail.
3. Even though the church may at times seem small and frail, it will grow to produce something magnificent.

Never would there be a time that church was more discouraged than in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus. He seemed as nothing compared to the mighty Caesar and the Roman gods, appearing before the crowds naked, bruised, and bloody. In his death perceived as powerless and weak. But in his resurrection he shows himself to be mighty and glorious. And when he appeared before the host of heaven, having completed the Father's will, having won righteousness for the church by the blood of the cross, having defeated Satan, death, and sin, the angels said of him “*behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered*” (Rev. 5:5). It is by the *branch*, the Lord Jesus Christ, that God's promises are fulfilled.

3.2 - The Stone (v.9)

Finally we are brought to an astonishing promise. “*I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day*” (v.9). That is, that what just took place for Joshua in this vision will actually be done for all of God's people, on a single day, once-for-all.

This promise is engraved on a stone which is given to Joshua as a guarantee of its fulfillment. Now the exact nature of the stone is unclear. Some have suggested that the stone represents a cornerstone or a capstone in the temple that is being rebuilt at the time of this vision. Others have suggested the *seven eyes* refer to seven facets of a gemstone that was perhaps worn on the front of Joshua's turban as a constant reminder to him of this promise.

In either case it is not the stone that is of prime significance, but the promise written upon it. That every time Joshua and his companions entered the temple to engage in their priestly duties they must claim God's promises. That is even though he would have struggled with sins every day, though he may feel unworthy to minister before God or to be numbered among his people, he must rest in the promise that one day God would send the *branch* and the problem of his uncleanness would be finally dealt with.

So to for us today, even though our conscience accuses us of sins, our sins displease God, and we could never by our own strength merit salvation, we rest in God's promises. **That we are righteous before God, by faith alone.**

Application:

1. “*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*” (v.10). This is a description of the peace that comes when sin is forgiven. We are given peace and quiet from the fear of condemnation under the shade of Christ's righteousness.

Conclusion:

Thus when our conscience afflicts us we are to meditate on God's promise regarding our saviour. He sent Christ not that they would be purified from sin and to live apart from him, no we are purified that he might be all our delight, joy, and life. Thus, Satan's accusations seek to destroy this vital union. May these promises be near unto our minds, hearts, and lips. That if God is for us, though

Satan, the world, and our sins be opposed to us, who can stand against us? For it is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, that his people may be stand justified before God. Amen.