

The Vision of Joshua the High Priest

Zechariah 3

Zechariah 3:1-7 - *“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. ² And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?” ³ Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. ⁴ Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, “Take away the filthy garments from him.” And to him He said, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.” ⁵ And I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So, they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the Lord stood by.”*

Background Notes

A brief outline of Zechariah's prophecy would be:

1. Eight visions in chapters 1-6
2. Four messages in chapters 7-8
3. Two prophetic oracles (“burdens”) in chapters 9-14.

Zechariah's fourth prophetic vision, the vision of Joshua the high priest, is in chapter 3. We'll see four more visions in chapters 4-6. All eight visions came to Zechariah on the same night, and all eight visions were meant to encourage the remnant of Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from their 70-year captivity in Babylon.

The first three visions were all about the **external blessings** for Israel in the future. The focus of the fourth vision was on **internal cleansing** for Israel. Israel will be cleansed and restored to the position that God originally intended for His people - the position of a priestly nation. God stated His original intent for His people Israel in Exodus 19:6: *“And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* Sadly, Israel lost that position because of her sin and disobedience, but in the future Israel will be cleansed and reinstated as a priestly nation. That's the essential meaning of Zechariah's fourth prophetic vision.

Doctrinal Points

1. Israel will be restored to its position as a kingdom of priests.

Joshua, the high priest at that time, had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with other captives under the leadership of Zerubbabel. In the vision, Joshua was standing before the Angel of the Lord. The Angel of the Lord in the vision is the Lord Himself, the pre-incarnate Son of God.

Joshua was standing before the Lord in filthy clothes (v3). Satan was present to oppose or accuse Joshua, and he accused Joshua about his position. How could a man wearing filthy garments be a priest? What kind of priesthood could this be?

Satan is constantly accusing God's people. In Revelation 12:10 Satan is described as *"the accuser of the brethren... who accuses them night and day before God."* Listen, Satan is accusing you and he's accusing me right now - and unfortunately he has plenty of shortcomings in our lives to point out. But just as the Lord stood up for Joshua and rebuked Satan in this vision, so the Lord stands up for us when Satan accuses us. 1 John 2:1 says, *"If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*

Notice that the Lord's rebuke of Satan here was not based on who or what Joshua was in himself, but on God's sovereign choice, and on what the Lord had done for Joshua. First of all, Joshua was a brand, or burning stick, plucked from the fire. Then his filthy garments were removed, he was clothed in clean costly robes and a priestly turban was placed upon his head. And then he was pronounced free from iniquity: *"See, I have removed your iniquity from you" (v4).*

Then Joshua, the cleansed high priest, was given a renewed commission (v6-7). The "house" and the "courts" refer to the Temple that was being rebuilt at the time of Zechariah's visions.

It doesn't take too much insight into this vision to realize that Joshua stands for the whole nation of Israel, and for Israel's restored position as a kingdom of priests in the future. As high priest, Joshua represented the whole nation before God. Notice that the Lord referred not just to Joshua, but also to all of Jerusalem: *"The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" (v2).* The brand plucked from the fire was not just Joshua, the high priest, but the remnant of Israel that had returned from the fires of the Babylonian captivity.

In verse 8, Joshua and the other priests were said to be a sign. They were symbolic of things to come - the restoration of the whole nation to the position of a priestly nation. The statement, *"I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day" (v9),* prophesied the removal of the nation's iniquity.

What a great day that will be! Israel will be restored to its position as a kingdom of priests.

2. Israel will be blessed with the presence of a perfect King and a perfect kingdom.

Zechariah 3:8-10 – *“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. ⁹ For behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua: upon the stone are seven eyes. Behold, I will engrave its inscription,” says the Lord of hosts. ‘And I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. ¹⁰ In that day,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘Everyone will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree.’*

Three Messianic titles of the Lord Jesus are mentioned in these verses – “My servant” (v8), “the Branch” (v8), and “the Stone” (v9). Zechariah’s audience would have been quite familiar with all three titles.

“My Servant” calls to mind the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah. In fact, Joshua’s iniquity and the iniquity of the nation could be removed only because the Messiah would suffer. *“He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).*

“The Branch” would also echo Isaiah’s prophecy. Although it was written two hundred years before this time, it would have been well known by the Jews who returned from captivity. Isaiah 11:1: *“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.”* The coming King would be in the line of David, and would have the legal right to the throne.

“The Stone” would call to mind Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 2, and the stone that struck the feet of the great statue. Daniel had interpreted that dream about 80 years before this time, and had written the account, so it would have been well known by Zechariah and the returning captives. In that vision, the Stone struck the feet of the great image (which represented Gentile power down through the centuries). The statue was then crushed into powder and blown away, and the Stone grew into a mountain that filled the entire earth.

The interpretation of this dream is given in Daniel 2:44-45: *“And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold—the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.”*

In Zechariah 3:9, the “seven eyes” of the stone probably represent the omniscience of the Messiah. He will judge the nations when He returns, and He will remove the iniquity of the land in one day. If it is properly interpreted in its context,

the “one day” is not referring to the day of the crucifixion (as some may say). No. It is a reference to that great day when the King returns to judge the nations, and sets up His perfect kingdom here on this earth.

Verse 10: *“In that day,” says the Lord of hosts, “Everyone will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree.”*

What a wonderful description of peace! It’s better than sipping lemonade on a beautiful beach in Hawaii! Israel - and the whole world - will be dwelling quietly in safety and peace, and the whole earth will be blessed with the presence of a perfect King and kingdom.

Practical Application

Are you still dressed in filthy rags?

We have a wonderful picture of salvation in Zechariah’s fourth vision!

Just as Joshua was a branch plucked from the fire, so we who have trusted Christ are like burning sticks that have been snatched out of the fire. No one is born a Christian. All of us are like burning sticks – we are born on the road to hell. When we receive the gift of salvation, we are like burning sticks that are plucked from the fire!

And we’re not just saved from the fire - our filthy garments are removed! The Hebrew word that’s used here for filthy garments is a very strong Hebrew word. It describes something that is disgusting and vile in both appearance and odor. The idea is that of garments that have been dragged through an outhouse or latrine.

If you’re not a believer, did you realize that you appear this way to God? You may think you look pretty good. You may even think that you’re better than almost everyone you know. But you’re clothed in filthy garments. And according to Isaiah 64:6, even the best you have to offer to God is like filthy rags when compared to God’s perfect standards of righteousness.

But here’s the good news. When you commit your life to Jesus Christ and trust in Him for salvation from your sin, your filthy garments are removed, and the robes of Christ’s righteousness are imputed to you! In fact, you become a priest of the Most High God, with Jesus Christ as your High Priest (1 Peter 2:9). What an amazing position!

In God’s eyes, are you still dressed in filthy rags? Or have you been clothed in priestly garments, provided by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?