

Who Is to Condemn?

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[0:00] You can turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Zechariah. Zechariah chapter 3. That is the second to last book of the Old Testament.

Zechariah is a fascinating figure in the Old Testament because he actually occupied two offices. He was both a prophet and a priest during the time in which the Jewish people returned from exile to Jerusalem. You can actually read of his life in Ezra and in Nehemiah as he's carrying out both of those duties of both offices.

But he's not just written about. Zechariah also himself wrote. We have this prophetic book written by him in our Bibles. And God used Zechariah to encourage a discouraged people.

He ministered to the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem. They had laid the foundation of the temple. They had started well, but eagerness and enthusiasm had waned as opposition had arisen.

[1:20] And as that opposition had arisen, the people became discouraged. They stopped the work. And their former zeal was now replaced with apathy. That's when God brings two prophets onto the scene, Haggai and Zechariah.

And he does, with those men, he calls the people out of their sinful apathy to repent and to return to him in faithfulness. Even as we see here in Zechariah, God's great faithfulness to them.

And that commitment that God has made to his people, it's on display through a series of visions in the book of Zechariah. It's actually eight straight visions given in this very quick hitting succession in just the first six chapters.

Imagine Zechariah, how incredibly overwhelming you might say that was. All of these visions given to him, all given in one night.

Well, this evening, we're not going to try to tackle all eight of those visions together. We're only looking at the vision of chapter three. Now, there's some important repetition that we need to see in this chapter.

[2:29] And of course, repetition is a very simple way of drawing somebody's attention to something. That must be important. You've said it a lot. You've said it over and over again. Well, here in Zechariah 3, we find a certain word repeated over and over and over again.

And it's the word standing. Standing. So listen for it as I read the first six verses where an angel is revealing this fourth vision of the book to Zechariah.

So Zechariah 3, beginning in verse 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.

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?

Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, Remove the filthy garments from him.

[3:36] And to him he said, Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments. 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. So you see there are a lot of people standing here in Zechariah chapter 3. So I'm going to take a cue from this passage, and I'm going to use the same word to organize the sermon this evening.

We'll consider three people who stand tonight. And the first to stand we see here actually is Satan. Satan stands to accuse.

We see that here in these first six verses. He is standing, and he's standing at the right hand of this individual who is identified as Joshua the high priest.

Now you can read of Joshua as well in Ezra and Nehemiah. His name there is actually spelled Jeshua with an E, but it is this man here that we see in Zechariah 3.

[4:41] He was the high priest at the time that Zechariah was prophesying. And now remember, Zechariah himself was a priest, but Joshua was the high priest. In fact, he was the first high priest of the post-exilic community.

So he holds a very important position. He was the leader of the priesthood, the head priest of this remnant that had just returned to the promised land. He was the main mediator between God and his people.

So when Joshua comes into view in this vision, we should absolutely see him as the representative for all God's people. This is not some obscure vision about an obscure individual.

This is a very significant vision that is centered on God and his people. We should see ourselves here standing before the angel of the Lord.

Not an angel. We need to see this clearly, but the angel. The same one who appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The same one who stood in the way of Balaam and his donkey.

[5:51] The same one who spoke to Gideon. This angel speaks as God. He identifies himself with God. He does things that only God can do.

Like here in this passage. He's the judge in the heavenly courtroom. He's not simply executing God's judgments. He is making the judgment himself.

That's a job that God alone has. Oh, and he's granting forgiveness. Again, that's a job that God alone has. This angel is so often associated with God that it's not hard to see the angel as God taking on human form.

There's a good argument to be made that this is the angel himself being God the Son. For once Christ came into the world in the New Testament, interestingly enough, the angel of the Lord no longer appears.

He's indicating that he and God the Son may be one and the same person. But either way, whether this is a theophany, an appearance of God in human form, or a Christophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ, the point is the angel of the Lord comes with all the power and authority of God himself.

[7:06] And he's standing there as judge in this heavenly courtroom scene with Joshua, our representative, on trial before him. But also standing there, standing at our representative's right hand, is Satan.

And he is full of accusations. Now, this is a very unique passage in the Bible. Because we see Satan doing his dirty work up close and personal.

Only here in Zechariah 3, and probably more famously, and even referred to this morning in Pastor John's sermon in Job, only in those two places do we see Satan making accusations.

But unlike in Job, we aren't told here what Satan's accusations are. We don't know the exact words that he said, but the overall thrust of his accusations is clear.

Joshua is dirty. Look at those clothes that Joshua is wearing. He's not fit to be a priest. He's not fit to be a high priest, the high priest.

[8:14] And then we see Joshua in verse 3. And we can't help but say, Wow, he's right, isn't he? Because Satan's got a point.

Because Joshua is clothed with filthy garments. They're dirty. They're soiled. There's no denying that this is all true. And these aren't just any garments.

It's not like Joshua is wearing jeans and a t-shirt and he's got some mud on them. No, these are very important clothes. These are his priestly vestments.

His special garments that were to be worn in God's special place as Joshua carried out his special duties. The whole chapter of Exodus is devoted to explaining what these garments were to be.

And there in Exodus 28, they are described as holy garments. A breast piece. An ephod. A robe. A coat of checker work.

[9:12] A turban and a sash. And this clothing was made of gold. Blue and purple and scarlet yarns. And fine twined linen. And to top it all off, in God's very detailed instructions there in Exodus 28, on the turban, this small plate of pure gold was made.

And it was engraved with words on it. And the words said, holy to the Lord. It was like this consecrated name tag, you might say.

Put right on the front of the turban. Right on the forehead of Aaron. And that's what we'd expect Joshua to be wearing in this vision that Zechariah was seeing. Showing Joshua to be very clearly set apart.

The representative of God's people. He's wearing these holy garments. And yet they are totally soiled. It's clear from verse 4 that the outward appearance of Joshua, it is symbolic of an inward condition.

The situation is far worse than it first seemed. Joshua, the representative of the people, isn't soiled by dirt. He's soiled by sin.

[10:24] These filthy garments are symbolic of his sinful state. They are symbolic of the sinful state of all the people. And here he is, standing before God in this state.

It's one thing to be in a situation where your clothes are stained. That can be a little bit embarrassing. We've probably all been there before where maybe we spilled our drink.

Or we got some food on ourselves and we went out in public. Maybe even more embarrassingly, we got up in front of people and we realized I have a stain on my clothes.

That can be embarrassing. How much worse when the dirt of your heart is on full display. And it's on full display, not just before other sinful people like yourself, but before a holy, righteous, pure God.

That was Joshua's situation. Standing there. He should have been ashamed of his guilt. It was obvious. It was evident to all. Just look at him.

[11:29] The evidence is right there on his very person. There's no hiding it. There's no minimizing it. There's no explaining it away. He doesn't have a change of clothes at hand for himself.

His sin is just totally exposed. And Satan pounces like that prowling lion that he is. He's right there. He's literally at Joshua's right hand.

That's a special place in the Bible. That's a place of authority. That's a place of power to be at the right hand of God. That's a place of privilege and blessing and favor.

It's an honor to be at someone's right hand. You have access to them. You can very directly address them, very intimately. They're right here. And here we find Satan.

But he's not addressing Joshua. He's accusing him. He's not coming to Joshua's defense, but he's acting as the prosecuting attorney in this heavenly courtroom scene.

[12:32] Now, that's actually another way of understanding the right hand in Old Testament times. It was the place that an accuser could be found. In Psalm 109, David pleads with God to deal with his enemy, his very present enemy.

And David says in verse 6, appoint a wicked man against him. Let an accuser stand at his right hand. Well, that is what Satan is doing now with Joshua.

He is doing what he does best. He is doing what his very name means. He is accusing, bringing his charges against Joshua before the supreme judge of heaven and earth.

This is the ultimate supreme court. There's no appeals to be made. If Satan's accusations stick, that's it. This is the final word. No appeals. The buck stops here as Satan stands to condemn this soiled representative of all God's people.

Now, we aren't told what accusations Satan is leveling against Joshua. Commentators have speculated. What might he have been accusing Joshua of specifically?

[13:42] What sin might it have been? But when we think of ourselves, when we think of our own sin, sadly, is it not true that every day Satan has fresh ammo at his disposal?

He doesn't need to work hard to find some sin to accuse us of before God. As Spurgeon said, my question would be in my case, which out of 50,000 things the devil would bring to choose?

Not what could he bring, but I say which out of 50,000 things he would choose to bring? The pride in my heart that day, exalting myself over another.

My envy of a neighbor. My bitterness towards a co-worker. The anger towards my family. Sin upon sin upon sin that Satan could bring.

What a bleak situation this is for Joshua. What a bleak situation it is for us when we consider ourselves and our own sinful state before a holy, righteous God.

[14:41] This is an open and shut case if there ever was one. It's not circumstantial. It doesn't depend on some shaky eyewitness testimony. It doesn't depend on the prosecution's expert witnesses and their conflicting reports with the defense's expert witnesses.

We literally came to court wearing the evidence against us. And so Satan cries, guilty! Guilty! Look at them!

Condemned! Punish them for their sins! And of course, any accusation that's made against us, Satan is really also splashing those accusations upon God, isn't he?

Because when Satan would stand to condemn us, there's always a challenge to God underlying those accusations. If you are so just, then you must not let the guilty go free.

If you are so good, then you must not let this evil go unpunished. Yes, Satan relishes the opportunity to put us on trial. He loves to bring us before the judge, but Satan wants to put the judge in the dock as well.

[15 : 56] How much greater his victory if he could find fault not just with us, but with God himself. And so Satan accuses and accuses and accuses in this heavenly courtroom scene.

This is so much like the opening two chapters of Job, isn't it? Satan standing before God and accusing God and his people. But there's also a very noticeable difference here in Zechariah. In this vision, Joshua is there with God and Satan. In the book of Job, Job doesn't come into the heavenly courtroom scene with Satan.

Job has no idea that Satan is in heaven accusing him before God. Job is unaware of all that's being talked about concerning him, but not here in Zechariah. Joshua is right there.

Satan is standing at his right hand, and Joshua is standing before the angel of the Lord. We see the added element here in Zechariah compared to Job. What will Joshua say?

[16 : 58] What defense does he have? He has none. The evidence is stacked up against him, so he doesn't say a word.

Guilty as charged. Deserving of damnation. There he is standing, silently awaiting the verdict. And yet, when the angel of the Lord speaks, it is not to condemn, but to justify.

So we've seen that Satan stands to accuse us, and now we come to point number two, but we stand having been graciously justified. So the angel of the Lord speaks, and he's not caught off guard.

He's not stumbling over his words. He's not trying to figure out, how do I answer Satan's accusations? He's not stumped, or surprised, or troubled. No, his words ring out with power, and authority, and confidence in verse two.

The Lord rebuke you, O Satan. The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you. Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?

[18 : 11] God is saying, I've saved this one by my grace, and in my mercy. I've snatched him from the fire. Kids, do you know what a brand is?

You might think, I've never heard of a brand before. What is a brand? It's just a fancy word for a stick or a piece of wood. When we were at the men's camp out a couple of weeks ago, some of you boys were plucking sticks from the fire, and all of us dads were saying, no, please, put that burning stick back in the fire before you light all of these chairs on fire.

Well, here is Joshua, this representative of God's people, and he has been plucked from the fire, saved by God's grace from damnation.

God says, he belongs to me. Satan, you can't have him. Your accusations will not hold up in my court. I've cleansed him from his sins.

God, and God alone, has done this marvelous work. He alone can declare the sinner innocent. He alone can say, your guilt is removed.

[19 : 19] He alone can silence the accusations of the devil. You could scour this passage. You could read it over and over and over again, but you will find nothing that Joshua has done to deserve this mercy and grace.

Joshua didn't clean himself up like in the courtroom, like, oh no, I've got to clean this off real quick. Hold on, let me do this. God, don't say anything yet. Let me get myself cleaned up. He didn't bring that spare set of robes or anything else of the sort.

It is God who takes the initiative in this scene to save him. The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem is the Lord who has chosen Joshua and clothed Joshua.

And so he does. He removes his filthy garments and he gives him pure, clean ones instead. So we can be abundantly sure of this. Joshua is clothed with a righteousness not of his own.

What an incredible moment of mercy and grace on display in this vision. It is so exciting that even Zechariah jumps in on it.

[20 : 26] It's actually really interesting. If we were working through the book of Zechariah, we would see this, but in every other vision, as the vision unfolds, Joshua will ask the angel a question.

The angel who is his guide. He'll ask him often a clarifying question. Like, what is this? What is this that I'm looking at? Or where are they going? Or where are they taking that?

But not here. Not in this vision. Zechariah doesn't ask a curious question. He blurts out a request. He can't contain himself.

He is so caught up in this joyful scene. And he's exclaiming, the turban too! Don't forget about the turban! Get him a clean turban! And they do.

This new turban is given from head to toe. He gets a full new pristine outfit. Not one article of old dirty clothing remains.

[21 : 25] And then verse 5 ends with these words. And the angel of the Lord was standing by. Meaning, God gave his approval of all of this. This was his doing.

It's just this astounding moment of salvation. The guilty sinner being justified. Being declared innocent. Being cleansed. Being forgiven. This incredibly unexpected, merciful, gracious act from God.

And while Zechariah is making that joyful request, there are two other individuals who don't speak. Neither Joshua nor Satan speaks a word.

But I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say they were probably thinking the same thing. How? How can this be? Satan with anger and malice and hatred and frustration, how can you just give him new clothes?

Joshua looking at himself in wonder and awe and gratitude. But how? How can you just give me new clothes?

[22 : 39] How is it that I'm justified? How is it that I'm declared righteous and clothed just the same when I deserve to be condemned? How can that be true, brothers and sisters of us as well?

And that brings us to the third point this evening. We've seen that Satan stands to accuse. We've seen that we stand graciously justified. And finally we see the promised servant stood condemned in our place.

Picking up in verse 6. And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, 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. Hear now, O Joshua, the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are assigned. Behold, I will bring my servant the branch.

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.

[23 : 52] 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. Here we see Christ, promised in the Old Testament.

Here he is, my servant, the branch, as he's called. This vision that's given to Zechariah is drawing on the language of Isaiah 11.

We read the opening verses of Isaiah 11, there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit, and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Well, that branch in Isaiah 11, that branch in Zechariah 3, that is the Lord Jesus Christ, and through him God would remove our iniquity in a single day.

And it's a sure thing. It is a done deal here in Zechariah 3. And we see that as God draws our attention to this single stone, and he sets it before Joshua, and it has seven eyes on it, and seven is a very important number in the Bible.

[25 : 12] It represents completion or fullness, so this single stone represents the single day when God will remove the iniquity of this land, or more particularly of us, and he'll do it completely.

He'll do it fully. And then there's that inscription. God doesn't say what exactly the inscription is, but whatever he writes on this stone most definitely relates to the removal of our iniquity, to the forgiveness of our sins, he clearly ties together there in verse 9, the inscription with his astounding declaration, I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.

He calls it a single stone, and he says he'll remove the iniquity of his people in a single day. They certainly go together. Perhaps even the inscription to be engraved on the stone is the same as that which was engraved on the plate of the priestly turban.

Holy to the Lord. Holy to the Lord. Because that is what he makes us as he removes our iniquity from us. God is saying, I will do this.

I will surely do it. You can count on it. And he did. He removed our iniquity in a single day. Because on a single cross, his servant, the branch, would hang with nails piercing his hands and his feet, bloodied and bruised, bearing our guilt and our shame.

[26:49] How is it that God can declare us innocent and give us fine clothing? Because Christ stood condemned in our place. God didn't give our sins a pass.

That would make him unjust. No, he poured out his wrath for our sins on his son. His son shed his blood for us. His son gave up his body for us.

We get new clothes because Christ being stripped of his clothes bore the punishment we deserve. So then we can come to the table tonight. We can sit at the table tonight because Christ stood condemned in our place.

And if Christ was condemned in our place, that means that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our sins have been paid for.

We owe no debt any longer. We've been cleansed. We've been forgiven. We've been clothed with the righteousness of Christ. So we have no need to fear. None of Satan's accusations will stick.

[27:52] For there is now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus. Of course, those are the wonderfully encouraging words that begin Romans chapter 8.

I think you can make a case for Paul having his Old Testament scroll of Zechariah rolled out before him perhaps even as he wrote Romans 8. Because as you read that chapter, especially the closing words of that chapter, you can't help but see this vision of Zechariah 3 come into view clear as day. The angel of the Lord standing, Joshua standing before him, and Satan standing at Joshua's right hand. All of these figures standing. And now there is another standing.

Standing at God's right hand, who is not accusing us, but who is advocating for us. As Romans 8 says, who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died, more than that who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

[29:03] We are justified because Christ was condemned. We are forgiven because Christ was punished for us. We are a brand plucked from the fire because Christ bore the heat of God's wrath to the fullest.

He died for us, and he now lives to plead for us with his nail-pierced hands, forgiven, cleansed.

We've been clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and we stand.

We stand justified by faith in Christ so we can now sit and share in this meal together tonight around his table. So we can share in it confident, we can share in it filled with joy, because as Paul then goes on to say in Romans 8, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So sit at the table, brothers and sisters. Your accuser has been silenced by your Savior, whose body hung on that tree, and whose blood was shed for you.

Out of love for you, he stood condemned, so you could now sit at this table, forgiven, like a brand plucked from the fire. So let's love him all the more in return tonight as we remember his death for us.

[30:38] Amen.