



GOD'S WORD TO THOSE WHO ARE GUILTY AS SIN

Catalog No. 7113
Zechariah 3:1-10
David Eckman
January 30, 1994

"So many questions, so many questions."

The old man repeated it again. "So many questions." Rain was falling outside, matching well the mood on the inside. The slow drizzle against a gray sky was the same as the gray in the heart of the old man. He moved closer to the fire. His oldest son, Judah, and his wife watched the mournful frame shuffle toward the flames. "I thought bringing you back to Jerusalem from Babylon would have made you happy, my father," Judah said.

"It should have, my son, it should have. I am surprised myself."

His son asked, "Gulda and I have watched you get sadder and sadder. You are not talking. Why?"

The father answered, "I looked forward to being back in Jerusalem for sixty years. I have dreamed about it, and prayed continually that the Lord would let me come home. I firmly believed the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and our wonderful Daniel. But now that I am here I feel terribly sad."

"Why?" Gulda asked. Judah learned long ago that prying into his father's heart was not usually successful, so he did not ask. But Gulda could. Gulda seemed to be able to penetrate the veil that frequently came over his father's heart.

"Gulda, I will tell you. I did not share my thoughts when we first came back from exile to Jerusalem. I was too melancholy to do so. In my eagerness to get back, and over the passage of time, I had seemingly forgotten so much.

"But as we came up toward the city gates, my mind was flooded with old memories. The shattered gate we came through was the one the Babylonians first tore down. I was only ten then. But I remember seeing my father executed, and I can still hear the screams of my mother. Fourteen of my relatives were killed that night. During the siege I was too nervous to cry. And like a foolish youth, parts of it I thought were exciting. But the excitement ended when the Babylonians started the killing."

Then with a faraway look in his eyes the old man became silent. Fingering the blue fringe on his robe, he looked at Gulda. Gulda, his wise daughter-in-law, asked, "Is there more? I feel there is more on your heart."

"Yes."

"What is it?" she asked.

"I wonder if anything has changed. God drove us into exile. He warned us about it for a thousand years. I keep wondering if what we have now is any different from what we had then? And I have so many questions about God's attitude toward us—questions about what He is doing."

"What are your questions?" Judah asked.

"They are simple questions, Judah. Will the mighty nations like Egypt and the Medes and the Persians allow us to live in peace? Or will we again become a stepping-stone on

someone's way to conquest? Will God protect us? He didn't seventy years ago. Will this broken-down city with its heaps for walls and its holes for gates ever be like it was?"

Then, the old man stood erect. "But I have greater questions. Questions with great doubts to fortify them. The Babylonians killed our priests. God said that the priests deserved it. Are our present priests any better? Will God accept this Joshua, the high priest? And will He accept our offerings after all of our miserable failures?"

"Surely God will!" said the son.

"What about our governor, Zerubbabel? What does God think of him? And I keep wondering, is history going to repeat itself? Shall we fall under God's judgment again? Is the whole nation going to have to go through this again? God said through the prophets we were like Sodom and Gomorrah to him. Is it still that way?"

"Father, your questions eat away at my heart with sadness," Judah said, putting his arm around his father, and embracing him.

"My son," the old man's voice broke with a sob. "My son, I need to know the answers to these questions more than I needed to see Jerusalem again before I die."¹

The major Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and all 12 of the minor prophets are preoccupied with either the coming fall of Jerusalem, the exile of its population to Babylon and with what would happen to the Jews during the captivity, or what would happen upon their return to Jerusalem. Following their return, the exiles had a number of questions which are answered in the book of Zechariah in eight visions that give God's perspective on the returning captives. The fourth vision, recorded in chapter 3 of the prophecy, answers their most important religious question: What would be God's attitude toward the priesthood when they began to serve him again? Before the captivity, the high priest, the man charged with the leadership of the priesthood, had betrayed his responsibility; the office had fallen into total apostasy.

Ezekiel 8:16-17 reveals what the priesthood was doing in the temple before the Babylonians burned it to the ground. Only the priests of the family of Aaron and their Levitical assistants were allowed in this area, of course. Notice what they were doing:

Then He brought me into the inner court of the LORD's house. And behold, at the entrance to the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar [the most sacred part of the temple], were about twenty-five men with

their backs to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east; and they were prostrating themselves eastward toward the sun. And He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked me repeatedly?" (NASB)

Just before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, the priesthood was worshipping the sun, not the God of Israel! This was why the returning captives were pondering the question: What would be God's attitude to the priesthood when they began to serve him again? Would he allow the descendants of these traitorous priests to function as priests under their high priest Joshua? God's response to these questions is given in this marvelous vision in Zechariah 3. Here we will find the answers to the old man's questions.

As we begin reading, the prophet is being guided by an angelic spirit being. Verse 1:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord [Yahweh], and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

"Satan" means "the opponent." The name simply stands for the person who does the accusing in a Jewish court of law. That is his function and right. Here, "Satan" is a title for a being who probably is Lucifer, "the son of the early morning." He is standing at the right hand of the high priest, to accuse him.

Verse 2:

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?"

What a strange statement, "And the Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, Satan!'" This would be like David saying, "let David rebuke you." But the Old Testament actually has three persons who represent God and are called "God," two of whom use the name "Yahweh." It is not only the New Testament that identifies several persons as God. In this Old Testament text, one of the clearest instances of this, the messenger of Yahweh says, "May Yahweh, the God of heaven whom I represent, rebuke you."

I am always interested in what the rabbis have to say about passages like this. The Old Testament takes in stride the doctrine that there are several persons who are God. Listen to this passage from Proverbs 30, for instance:

*The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, the oracle.
The man declares to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal:
Surely I am more stupid than any man,
And I do not have the understanding of a man.
And I have not learned wisdom,
But I have knowledge of the Holy One.
Who has ascended into heaven and descended?
Who has gathered the wind in His fists?
Who has wrapped the waters in His garment?*

*Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is His name or His son's name?
Surely you know!*

What a question for the Old Testament to ask! We know the answer, of course. His name is "The Father," and his Son is Jesus.

Notice the strange clothing that Joshua, the high priest, is wearing. His garments make him as guilty as sin. Verse 3:

Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel.

The King James Version is much more straightforward than the newer translations of the Bible; they tend to be chicken-hearted at times. "Filthy garments," the description given Joshua's clothing, is a very mild translation. It should be translated "garments of excrement and vomit" — quite a remove from "filthy."

It is extremely important to understand what is happening here. Satan, the opponent, is accusing the high priest and the priesthood of being contemptible traitors. Joshua, the high priest, symbolically representing the priesthood, is defenseless; he is covered in excrement (the polite term) and vomit, in clear violation of the Old Testament laws of cleanliness and purity. He is guilty, without defense — and so is the priesthood.

We should not be squeamish about this description of Joshua's garments. The Bible addresses some pretty basic things. The book of Deuteronomy, for example, sets down a law regarding what every Israelite should carry with him in the wilderness so as to observe certain hygienic laws. Actually, Israel was the only nation in the ancient world that had such laws. What is interesting is why they should do what they were commanded to do, as we learn in Deuteronomy 23:13-14:

"and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside [a euphemism], you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement [the same term as is used in Zechariah 3 that is translated "filth."]. Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you lest He turn away from you."

This kind of instruction was repeated over and over in a series of Old Testament purity laws. The high priest was not allowed to go near a corpse, touch blood or excrement, etc. But here we read that Joshua's garments were covered in excrement and vomit. The lesson is clear: the high priest was defenseless and guilty.

Let us examine the three characters in Zechariah's vision. The are: the angel of Yahweh; Satan (Lucifer, "the son of the morning"); and Joshua, the high priest. What a unique group. I believe that the messenger of Yahweh is the preincarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, of course, is now our High Priest, our protector in heaven. So this messenger of the Lord will become the High Priest, the

protector and representative of believers in heaven, following his crucifixion and resurrection.

Furthermore, I believe that this Satan, Lucifer, “the son of the morning,” once functioned like a high priest. In Ezekiel 28, it is recorded that this anointed cherub stood between God and his creation before man was created. He acted as a screen between spirit creation and God. But he was rejected from that position because iniquity was found in his heart, which was corrupted because of his beauty. The third member of this select group is Joshua, the high priest, the intermediary between the people of Israel and their God.

In the vision, Satan is bringing an accusation before the angel of Yahweh, God himself. He is complaining about the justice of God because he was rejected from the same type of position as Joshua. Humanity was accepted, but he was rejected. Satan is saying, “Don’t you know that Joshua is guilty? He is covered with the proof of it.” But to this accusation, God says, in effect, “I have chosen him. Who he is is more important to me than anything he has done wrong.”

This is the great truth of Christianity: People are more important to God than their guilt. When God thinks of you he is not preoccupied with your guilt; he is preoccupied with his love for you. That is why the angel of the Lord turns to Satan and says, “Yahweh rebuke you!” — because Yahweh had chosen this man. God has not chosen to deliver rebellious spirit beings. He is prejudiced toward man. The great proof of that is that Christ was born not as a spirit, but as a man. “Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?” says the angel of the Lord. Satan is legitimately upset. God in his mercy chose Jerusalem with its defiled priesthood.

Next, Joshua receives new robes. Verse 4:

And he [Yahweh] spoke and said to those who were standing before him saying, “Remove the filthy [excrement- and vomit-covered] garments from him.” Again he said to him, “See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.”

What a wonderful picture this is. When a person is saved, God does two things. First, he removes the sinner’s objective guilt. All of his iniquity, past, present and future, is taken care of. But, more than that, God clothes in Christ the person who trusts in Jesus as Savior so that he has the positive righteousness of God in him. If you have trusted in Christ, this applies to you, too. You have the righteousness of God because you are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. That is your festal robe. It is all the garment you need to enter into the eternal dance of heaven. Your guilt is dealt with and you have positive righteousness imputed to you.

And notice that the guilt is taken care of and the festal robe given before there is any mention of service. Our righteousness in Christ does not depend on how well we serve; it depends on how wonderful Christ is. Our service proceeds out of gratitude; it does not buy God’s kindness. He has chosen to be kind; we do not

have to work for it.

Next, Zechariah volunteers something. Verse 5:

Then I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” [The high priest normally wore a turban.] So they put a clean [ritually pure] turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the Lord was standing by.

Joshua’s iniquity has been taken care of and he is clothed.

Next, he is told how he can live a blessed life of service which flows out of the imputed righteousness, his festal garments.

And the angel of the LORD admonished Joshua saying, “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 [as high priest] and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who are standing here.

This is the marvelous New Testament pattern: When we come to Christ our objective guilt is taken care of and we are dressed in his righteousness. All of this is settled for eternity so that we can relate to God the Father with the same quality of relationship that Christ himself has with him. Based on that, we have the privilege to serve in Christ’s stead. He has gone to heaven and left his body here. Because we are clothed with Christ, we are the physical substitute for him on this earth. Our service follows, not as a way of gaining God’s favor, but as an appreciative response to that immense gift of being right with him.

There are some wonderful lessons in this Old Testament passage. Here is the first one: *In order to qualify to be right with God, you can’t be an angel.* You have got to be a human being and you must be guilty. You must have done wrong things. You have got to have lied. (I will assume that everyone listening to me has lied. If you say you have not, you are lying!) And you have to be objectively guilty. You have to have stolen things; you have had to be viciously angry and said nasty and cruel things; you have had to have thought perverse and wicked things. You may have murdered someone. I would not be surprised if there were a few people here who have committed murder. You have had to have committed adultery, had an abortion, abused children, abused friendships, betrayed relationships, hated people or been bitter toward God or man. If you are guilty of any of these things you are an excellent candidate for forgiveness and renewal. If you have not, you do not need God, grace or kindness; you have yourself and your own delusions.

So the first lesson here is that if you are good and guilty, and if you turn to the Savior, the Savior will be good to you. You do not have to hide your guilt from yourself or from God. There is a God who values you more for who you are than for what you have done wrong. Not only has he chosen Jerusalem, he has per-

sonally chosen you. Enjoy the compliment.

Here is the second lesson: *You have got to be weak and defenseless.* Jesus said that he came to help the sinful, the weak, the morally sick. The healthy do not need a physician, he said, only the sick. If you are weak, if you cannot help yourself, if you are a failure, you are a candidate for biblical Christianity. God does not save or deliver the self-sufficient. Isn't that wonderful news? Joshua was absolutely guilty and without defense. Yet God said, "Take away those filthy clothes and clothe him in festal garments. Then we will give him the privilege and the joy of a grateful response of service."

If you are a Christian, be preoccupied with the grace of God. Recognize that the cross has dealt thoroughly with your objective guilt before God. Recognize that you are clothed in Christ. You do not have to buy off God with your service; it will flow from the deep acceptance you have in Christ.

If you are not a Christian, I have a great offer for you. If you are weak and helpless and honest enough to admit that you have done wrong things, you can have God as your friend forever. Trust that Christ has died in

your stead to pay for your wrongdoing — because it really deserves the death sentence. Trust in him as Savior and you will be all right with God forever. God eternally likes anyone who trusts in his Son even a little bit.

This marvelous picture in Zechariah 3 reflects the spiritual realities of the Bible: The deeper your need, the greater the Savior will be.

Our Father, those of us who are your children come into your presence dressed in the festive robes of the person of Christ himself. Thank you for the undeserved acceptance you have given us. We praise you for your sheer favoritism to the sons and daughters of man. As your children, we ask that we may enjoy being members of your household. May we serve with glee our ascended Savior and God, the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.

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1 David Eckman, *Discovering Micah Through Malachi*, Guideposts © 1990.