

Zechariah 3

Littlebourne - 29th September 2024 - Zechariah 3:1-10

Many people, in the past and still today, have the idea that they fall in and out of God's grace.

You do good, you're in God's good books for a while, but inevitably you fail, and you're back to square one. In short, we can have this feeling of 'He loves me, He loves me not', a fluctuating relationship with God.

The whole history of Old Testament Israel is like this - they're in and they're out. We've talked about how they are returning from a lengthy exile - a period of being out of God's graces for a while, and now they're returning to God, and Zechariah's encouragement thus far has been to rely on God in this fresh start. They're rebuilding the temple, getting back on good terms with God.

Back in June, Chelsea and I saw the Canterbury Shakespeare Society doing Marlowe's 'Faustus'. It tells the tale of Doctor Faustus, who sells his soul to the devil, and he has some fun, before it all goes wrong. This is the play that popularised the idea of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other side, tugging the conscience in different directions. Faustus has several scenes like this. There's this sort of unspoken assumption that there are two warring forces, of equal power, pulling him in each direction.

People can have this attitude that they're teetering on the edge of righteousness and unrighteousness, that it could go either way, and frequently does.

But our salvation is not like that, and that's some of what Zechariah is talking about in this next chapter.

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. 2 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?"

Zechariah's fourth vision shows him a scene that might be reminiscent of the beginning of Job. We the Lord and we see Satan. Satan, literally here the adversary or the accuser, not necessarily a proper name. Lastly there's the one they're talking about, in this instance Joshua, the high priest at the time.

But unlike in Job, where Satan, the accuser, is allowed to torment Job, in this instance, Satan is rebuked. God says that He has chosen Jerusalem. Satan might have his eyes set on Jerusalem, on the priesthood, on the temple being built, but God has chosen Jerusalem and thus protects it.

God describes Jerusalem as "a brand plucked from the fire" - they've been in the fire, in exile. They've been close to destruction for good, but God has snatched them out, saved them from destruction.

We see that same Hebrew phrase used in Amos 4 (verse 11):

*11 "I overthrew some of you,
as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah,
and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning;
yet you did not return to me,"
declares the Lord.*

Throughout the Old Testament, we see this happen - that Israel is in the fire, in exile, up against unbeatable odds, and God saves them from almost certain destruction.

Notice also who is clearly in charge here - both Joshua and Satan stand before God, who is unmistakably the one calling the shots. We don't live in a dualist world, there isn't an endless struggle between good and evil, chaos and order, ying and yang. No, God is truly God, over all creatues, Satan included.

v3

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

Now we see that Joshua is wearing filthy garments - he's not clean, not fit to be a high priest. The high priest, and indeed priests in general, had strict rules about cleanliness to work in the temple, to approach God. The high priest especially, had to not just be clean in the sense of having washed and put on fresh clothing before doing his duties, but for the most important of his duties, the yearly entering the most holy place to make atonement for the people, he had to be cleansed from guilt - he had to first atone for his own sin, before he could bring the people's sins to God. He had to first be clean himself before he could bring cleanliness to the people.

So an unclean high priest is a problem for Israel - no clean high priest, no clean people. Sin would go unatoned for.

v4-5

4 And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." 5 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.

Now the solution. Rather than the high priest making a sacrifice for his own sin, as is required in the law of Moses (Leviticus 16), he is given clean garments by God. His iniquity, his guilt and sin, have been taken away.

He is given pure vestments, and a clean turban. The turban was part of the uniform of the priesthood for Israel - it's translated variously as a mitre, headdress, or turban - a linen hat or wrapped cloth, and for the high priest, extra adornment in the form of a golden plate with 'Holiness unto the Lord' engraved on it, attached with blue ribbons. Exodus 28:38:

36 "You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the LORD.' 37 And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban. 38 It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.

In fact, the priests were not allowed to do any of their duties without the right clothing:

43 and they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they go into the tent of meeting or when they come near the altar to minister in the Holy Place, lest they bear guilt and die. This shall be a statute forever for him and for his offspring after him.

The clothes were a symbol of holiness, of cleanness, required for the priests to minister before God and not face the wrath of God.

Symbolically, God here is taking away the reproach on the priesthood, reconsecrating them for service now that the exile is over.

v6-7

6 And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, 7 “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.

God assures high priest Joshua that if he, and his priests, keep to God's ways, then they will have charge of his courts, his temple, and they will continue to be able to access the temple.

It's a familiar sort of thing - blessings are promised for those that follow God, Israel is told that if they keep God's commands, that they will prosper. Think Deuteronomy 28:

1 “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. 2 And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. 3 Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. 4 Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 6 Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

But that's only part of the story. The chapter goes on, after a lot more potential blessings, with this:

15 *“But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. 16 Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. 17 Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 18 Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 19 Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.*

There are, in God's covenant with Israel, blessings for upholding the terms of the covenant, and curses for going against the covenant, and what I've quoted there is a small part of the listing of these blessings and curses.

The following chapters of Deuteronomy, chapters 29 and 30, form Moses' third major address to the people of Israel - a final address. In chapter 29 he reminds them of all God has done for them, and appeals to them to stay faithful, and then in chapter 30 he talks about how the people will, after they experience the curses, they will eventually repent and be restored. Moses assumes they will experience both the blessings and the curses too - they won't always remain faithful. Moses knows they will turn aside. And he knows they will eventually repent.

But the question is, when they turn back to God, what's stopping the cycle from continuing? We see in the story of Old Testament Israel a continual turning away, then being restored, then turning away, then being restored. There needs to be something to break the cycle.

v8-9

8 *Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. 9 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.*

The solution to this cycle of turning away and repentance is found in these verses - the Angel of the Lord says to Joshua and his friends, presumably his fellow priests, that they are a sign of someone to come.

The priesthood in Israel fulfilled a symbolic role - we know from what we read about in the New Testament, that the sacrifices offered by the priests in the temple were never really enough. They never really solved anything. But they were a picture and a pattern to illustrate the one to come, who would deal with sin finally.

He's called here "my servant the Branch". That's a messianic title, used here, chapter 6, and in Isaiah. Isaiah 4:2, talking about the Messiah:

In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.

Or Isaiah 11:1, talking about the Messiah:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

This title of 'the branch' relates to his coming from David - rooted in the people of God, descended from the kingly line, the rightful king over Israel.

Or of course, a similar theme is found in the New Testament. John 15:

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Here the metaphor is expanded - He is the branch, and He is the new root, from whom life comes to all who are 'in Him'.

Then there's this other mysterious image - the stone, with seven eyes, facets, or faces. The number seven typically symbolises perfection. There are other passages about the Messiah that use this symbolism, so that's a good probability. Peter's first letter quotes three Old Testament instances of the stone as a symbol of the Messiah, of Christ (1 Peter 2:6-8):

6 For it stands in Scripture:

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

7 So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

*“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

8 and

*“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”*

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

Related to these two symbols, through the Messiah, the Lord will "remove the iniquity of the land in a single day". He will deal with sin for good.

Remember in Hebrews 7:

23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Joshua and his fellow priests were fallible, human. Even when we read about priests that do a good job in the Old Testament, subsequent generations turn aside. But not so with Christ - He is the perfect priest, who lives forever and applies His priesthood for all time.

In Christ, there is no more a situation of feeling that we're in God's good books, then out of them, then in again, and on and on. We're not reliant on a flaky priesthood to apply the grace of God to us. The cycle for Israel is broken in Christ.

Now of course, salvation for the Israelites in the Old Testament was a forward looking to Christ - they, like us, weren't in reality in and out of God's good books every five minutes. The works of the priesthood were symbols that pointed towards Christ, that showed the people what the coming Messiah would accomplish for them. They were shadows and

types, to illustrate the truth.

We can all fall into this trap of thinking that our actions are ultimately the deciding factor in what God thinks of us. That when we fail, we literally fall from grace.

But God gives Joshua clean garments - Joshua doesn't earn them or acquire them for himself, he is given them, as we are given the righteousness of Christ. Every time we fail, which is often, we don't need to start afresh. We need to recognise that Christ has sorted our sins, once and for all time.

v10

Lastly, we see the consequences of all this - verse 10 says:

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.”

Notice, it says, 'in that day' - the days when all iniquity is removed, following that single day when sin is dealt with. In that day, peace with God and with each other is accomplished. Since the decisive turning point in history, Christ's kingdom is growing in the world, a kingdom of peace and prosperity.

Micah chapter 4 tells us more:

*1 It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and it shall be lifted up above the hills;
and peoples shall flow to it,
2 and many nations shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;*

*and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
4 but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.
5 For all the peoples walk
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and ever.*