

The God who cleanses

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[0 : 00] So this morning's reading is from Zechariah 3, which can be found on page 959 of the Church Bibles. So Zechariah 3, starting to read at 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 this not 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.

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. 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 I will rule my house and you and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.

[1 : 19] 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.

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.

In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbour to come under his vine and under his fig tree. Heather, thanks very much indeed for reading.

Let me add my welcome to you. It's very good to have you here at Grace Church this morning.

Good to welcome friends and family of Mark and Lucy and also of Helen as well.

Well, please do keep the Bibles open. Zachariah chapter 3. This is the second in our series of talks from Zachariah. And the reason we are looking at it through the autumn is because it's one of the most important books in the Old Testament.

[2 : 24] It's written around 520 BC, so right at the end of the Old Testament period. And it clearly looks forward to and anticipates brilliantly the coming of Jesus Christ.

And because Christianity is all about Jesus, then this is a good book for us to be studying through the autumn. Because the point is, of course, that it's not as if Jesus kind of suddenly arrives on the stage of world history from nowhere.

For hundreds of years, God had been saying that he would come to earth, even that when he did so, he would be rejected, he would be killed, and he would rise again. Now, you and I find it very hard, don't we, to predict what's going to happen tomorrow.

For all of us, tomorrow will be a day full of surprises. But the Old Testament tells us hundreds of years before the event what the coming of Jesus will look like.

Which, of course, is very compelling. It shows us that God is clearly working out his purposes throughout history. And the heartbeat of this book, and we'll see that, I think, more and more as we go through it over the next few weeks, is that God will accomplish his purposes for his world.

[3 : 42] Unlike the programs and manifestos of prime ministers and presidents, his agenda does not get derailed by events.

And therefore, what God does throughout this book is to call each one of us to return to him and to line up our lives with what God is doing in his world.

It's how the book begins. Just look back to chapter 1, verse 3, which we looked at last week. It's a command to return to God, but also it's a wonderful promise that God is willing to have us.

The promise that he will return to us. Well, here in Zechariah chapter 3, we find ourselves in the middle of a whole series of eight visions that Zechariah had one evening given by God. They're not kind of dreams. They're not the product of Zechariah's imagination. They are visions as God uses Zechariah as his mouthpiece to address his people.

[5 : 01] And we see today in chapter 3 both how it's possible to return to God and the urgency of doing so. And you'll see there's an outline on the back of today's service sheet, which you may find useful.

I know lots of people find it useful to take notes just so they can look back at those notes. Perhaps tomorrow morning or later on today do take notes if that would be helpful. First of all, a terrible verdict.

Guilty before God. Now, sometimes it's better, isn't it, to know the truth, however much, in a sense, we dislike it.

James Hughes Onslow wrote an article in the Evening Standard some time ago about the standard of school reports. He's got two children, each at different schools. And he explained how the reports from one school didn't pull their punches.

For example, this is the most uncommunicative child I've ever tried to teach. By contrast, he said, the reports from the other school were a delight to read.

[6 : 08] He said what a delight it was to read that our daughter was doing well and that she had good and positive friendships and a lovely sense of humour. But, he says, this wonderful picture fell apart when we discovered that almost exactly the same thing had been written about all her friends.

How does the article conclude? Better to have no report than one that is misleadingly rosy. Well, I take it there could be nothing more important than knowing exactly where we stand before God, where all of us naturally stand before God, and that we'd much rather know the truth than be flattered.

Which is why this courtroom scene here in Zechariah chapter 3 is so important. It is the most dramatic courtroom scene imaginable.

I'm going to read verses 1 to 3 again of Zechariah chapter 3. As I do so, see if you can imagine the courtroom scene in your mind's eye. Then he showed me Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing in his right hand to accuse him.

And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan. The Lord who's chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. Is this not a brand plucked from the fire? Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments.

[7 : 46] Now there's no jury here, but there's certainly a judge, isn't there? There's a prosecutor, and there's the accused. The judge is God himself, the angel of the Lord, verse 1, the representative of God.

As for the prosecutor, verse 2, that is clearly Satan, ready to accuse the prisoner in the dock. The Bible's clear that God and Satan are in opposition in the world.

And the opposition, although largely unseen, occasionally in the Bible, it's as if the curtain is kind of drawn back. And you see the spiritual reality, which is precisely what we see here.

And then there's the accused, Joshua, the high priest, clothed, verse 3, in filthy garments. And in verse 4, it's clear, isn't it, that these filthy garments represent Joshua's sin, his iniquity.

In fact, the word that's used in the original literally means his clothes were covered in excrement. It looked as if he's been dragged out of a cesspit. Such is the state of the man.

[8 : 57] Which is why, of course, Satan doesn't open his mouth. No doubt he'd arrived at court that day with a huge file in his hands. But actually he has nothing to say.

He needn't say anything. No doubt the file was full of evidence against Joshua. But he has nothing to say. He doesn't need to speak. Because Joshua's state speaks for itself.

And Joshua, too, is silent. There is nothing he can say in his defence. But what I want us to notice is that it's not just Joshua who is in the dock.

Because Joshua is the high priest. He alone, as high priest, had the awesome privilege, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, of coming before God on behalf of God's people, so that they could be then made acceptable to God.

He symbolically, if you like, carried the whole people of God into God's presence. In other words, Joshua stands here, representing all of God's people, as he stands there in 520 BC.

[10:15] You see, it's not as if God's people are kind of watching the trial from the safety of the public gallery. They are in the dock, too, represented by Joshua, their high priest.

It's why in verse 2, if you look at it, we read, The Lord has chosen Jerusalem. Rebuke you. You see, if this was all about Joshua, you might expect God to say, The Lord has chosen Joshua. Rebuke you. But no, it's the Lord has chosen Jerusalem. Rebuke you. Because it's not Joshua who alone is guilty before God. It's all the people who are guilty before him.

So here we are. It's a terrible picture, isn't it? Here is Joshua. There's no hope for him. And there's no hope before God for the people he represents either.

They, too, are clothed in filthy garments. This is the spiritual reality of sinful people standing before a God who is good and righteous and holy.

[11:27] And, of course, the real sting is that this courtroom scene anticipates another courtroom scene.

Because it anticipates the day when each one of us will have to stand before the living God, as Joshua does here on the final judgment day.

And the Bible leaves us in no guilt that we, too, are patently unfit for God's presence, that we are guilty before him.

That however beautiful and respectable we appear to one another in God's sight, it is as if we are clothed in filthy rags. I guess we tend to think of ourselves, I certainly think of myself, I think, as a basically good person who sins occasionally.

We muck up, we get things wrong, but essentially we are good people. But, no, the reality is that you and I are sinful to the core.

[12:35] Each of us has said no to God, that I will run my life, my way, pursuing my agenda and my ambitions. And that affects every aspect of our personalities.

We may go to church, we may even be quite religious, or we may not be at all. But in terms of the decisions and priorities of day-to-day life, I am the one who runs my life, my way.

God doesn't get a look in. It is a terrible verdict we see here, but it is a right verdict. Guilty before God.

Now, I think one of the difficulties which we have when we think about guilt is that our consciences distort it the whole time. So I find myself not feeling guilty about the things I frankly should feel guilty about, and feeling guilty about the things which actually I have no reason to feel guilty about.

So whenever I'm in an airport and I walk through the nothing to declare channel, I know I have nothing to declare, but I feel guilty. Where do I look?

[13:47] Do I look at my trolley as I kind of push it through? Do I smile at the customs officers? But then, of course, perhaps they'll think I have something to hide. Or do I glare at them? But then they might take a dislike to me.

I feel guilty. Feeling guilty and being guilty are very different. So let me ask each one of us, have you faced the reality of your guilt before God?

Have you begun to see yourself as God sees you by nature, dressed in filthy rags, rightly deserving God's condemnation, on the final day?

We need to see that. Because, of course, that is the first step to returning to God. If you won't admit your guilt, if you fail to see that, spiritually speaking, you are covered in excrements, if all you do is to compare yourself with other people, and to conclude that, well, you may not be the best, but you're certainly better than a lot of them.

Of course, if that is the way we think, we will never return to God. Because we'll never see the need. But can I say that once we have acknowledged our guilt, there is enormous freedom.

[15:13] It means we don't have to pretend before God, or before others. It means we don't have to defend ourselves when things go wrong, or blame others, or blame God.

But above all, we'll then appreciate how extraordinary it is that we can be right with God.

So let's move on from the terrible verdict to a wonderful offer. A wonderful offer, right with God. Now what we're going to see is that just as Joshua's guilt points to everyone's guilt, so the fact that he is made right with God, now made fit for God, points to the wonderful offer that God makes to everyone, and to anyone.

Have a look, will you, at verses 8 and 9. 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'll bring my servant a branch. For behold, on the stone that I've set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts.

[16:29] And I'll remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. Now Joshua, verse 8, is a sign, a sign of things to come.

We're told at the end of verse 9 that what has happened to him points forward to a future day when God will deal with iniquity and sin in a single day. When he will do for the whole land, for all the people, what is done here for this one man.

For Joshua. And he'll do so in a single day. Just imagine that you turned on the radio tomorrow morning, or looked at the papers, or whatever it is, and you saw that the budget deficits had been dealt with by George Osborne in a single day.

Or that the Pakistan government had announced that the devastation caused by the floods had been dealt with in a single day. Or that the world aid agencies had announced that world poverty and AIDS had been dealt with in a single day.

Well, we'd be amazed, wouldn't we? And here is something even more amazing, far more amazing. God announcing that he will deal with sin in a single day.

[17:48] He'll achieve it, if you look at verse 8, through his servant, the branch. It's a rather odd name. I don't think there's anyone with that name here this morning. But it's a technical name in the Old Testament for a descendant of King David, who was the greatest of Old Testament kings.

Now, as we look on through Zechariah, we'll see that this is clearly Jesus. And the day, clearly, that's being referred to here is the day of his crucifixion.

I've put on the outline, Zechariah chapter 13, verse 1, which speaks of that day. On that day, there shall be a fountain open for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

And therefore, of course, what's happening here to Joshua is a wonderful visual aid, a wonderful picture of what the death of Jesus will achieve.

Let's look at it in a little bit more detail together. First of all, there is the pardon of sin. The pardon for sin, verse 4. And the angel said to those who were standing before Joshua, remove the filthy garments from him.

[19:05] And to him he said, behold, I've taken your iniquity away from you. I wonder if you can picture that. Joshua's sin, his filthy garments are removed and taken away.

Anticipating wonderfully what the death of Jesus Christ would achieve. Imagine for a moment this filthy handkerchief.

Here it is, absolutely revolting, as you can see. And imagine that it represents my sin and our iniquity.

And imagine for a moment this is Jesus. This hand represents Jesus. And by dying on the cross in our place, Jesus bore the punishment for our sin in his place.

Our sin removed. Our sin dealt with. Now we could have had a whole person couldn't we dressed in messy clothes up the front here and done the same thing.

[20:08] But on a smaller scale that is a wonderful picture of what the death of Jesus achieved.

Martin Luther, the 16th century German reformer tells how on one occasion in his study he imagined being visited by Satan who began to accuse him and write down a long list of his sins.

And after he had written a whole side of paper Luther said to him have you finished yet? No, replied Satan angrily. He carried on scribbling, scribbling, scribbling, scribbling furiously page after page after page every one of them true.

When at last he had finished writing Luther simply wrote across each one the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin. That is one side.

of what the death of Jesus achieved. But then secondly the provision of righteousness. Have a look at verse 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. See it's not just that Joshua's filthy clothes are removed he has given new clothes.

[21:28] he has given clean clothes which anticipates the other side of what Jesus' death achieved. Because through his death Jesus not only cleanses from sin but he makes those who trust in him perfect in God's sight.

sins. Now I imagine this will be new to some of us this morning. We often I think emphasize the fact that Jesus has dealt with sin that he removes our sin rightly so but perhaps we are less good at teaching the other part of it as well.

Jesus died in our place it not only means there's no record of sin but the perfect purity of Christ is given to us.

I've put 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21 on the outline where the Apostle Paul puts it in a slightly different way but he says for our sake God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

let's go back to the handkerchief and here is a perfect white handkerchief just checking yep it is and imagine that here is Jesus clothed in perfect righteousness and purity we've already said that on the cross our own sin is removed that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin but the other half of that transaction so to speak is that those who trust in him are now clothed in the perfect purity and righteousness of Christ it is credited to us from now on God looks at those who trust in Jesus who have returned to him and he says I will now treat you as if you have lived a perfect life in fact I'll treat you in the same way

[23 : 32] I treat my son Jesus you see it shows what a nonsense it is when someone says well I'm a Christian but I'm not a very good one I wonder if you've heard someone say that perhaps you thought it yourself I'm a Christian but I'm not a very good one but there are no imperfect Christians Christ's work is perfect we've been given clean clothes to say I'm a Christian but not a very good one is through our life to God not through the death of Jesus but through our own performance you see let me ask how do you relate to God is it through the death of Jesus or is it through your own performance I imagine many of us if we're honest relate to God through our performance we think God is pleased with us or displeased with us according to how in our view our own

Christian lives are going but the wonderful reality is that your relationship with God if you're trusting in Christ is no difference on your worst day to what it is on your best day it's not that Christians don't sin but we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ that is how God sees us and it's how he treats us pardon for sin provision of righteousness thirdly the prospect of heaven verse 10 in that day declares the Lord of hosts every one of you will invite his neighbour to come under his vine and under his fig tree now again I wonder if you can picture this in your imagination it's a picture of abundance it's a picture of peace it's a picture of security it is a miniature picture of heaven in Old Testament language a picture of a new creation and we'll think more about that as we go on in the book pardon for sin the provision of righteousness the prospect of heaven you see the wonderful truth is that if we've put our trust in Christ if we have returned to

God so to speak then we are beyond the accusation of Satan on the judgment day the Christian will stand before God as all of us have to do and will be declared not only forgiven but to have lived a perfect life to be right with God now I take it that begs the question doesn't it for all of us on the judgment day as we stand before God whose clothes will we be wearing will we be wearing our clothes or will we be wearing the new garments given to us through the death of Jesus I guess the crowd this size are about to be some of us actually we've never returned to God it may be that until today we've never seen the need to return to God well will you return to him now having seen the need if you'd like to do that and you're thinking

I don't know how to do it why not speak to a friend at Grace church perhaps you know or come and speak to me afterwards I love to give you I've got a little booklet which explains how you can do that and for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus why this is the motivation we need to live the Christian life and to line up our lives with what God is doing in his world not to earn our salvation but to do so out of gratitude for all God has done for another question if we have returned to God if we are Christians this morning what is it that motivates us to serve God what motivates us to live for Christ it can so easily be a guilt perhaps or fear or what other people think of us or surely the right motivation is God's undeserved kindness he is overwhelmingly generous see when we find ourselves grumbling about the

Christian life come back to Zechariah chapter 3 imagine ourselves in Joshua's shoes smell the stench of it and then open our eyes to the wonderful offer that God makes available in Christ it is a life of great joy rejoicing in his unconditional generous gift this is the motivation we need if we're to live for him I take it it's why chapter 3 comes where it does in the book it's a book about returning to God lining up our lives with what God is doing in the world the motivation for doing this is gratitude a love for God a deep joy at what he has done for us well

[29 : 02] I'm going to read from Romans chapter 8 as we finish no need to turn to it but I'm going to read for us and then we'll have a few moments of quiet and then we'll stand to sing our last song Romans chapter 8 is a wonderful reminder of the status of those who trust in Christ that we are beyond the accusations of Satan so why don't I read it the last part of Romans 8 we'll then have a few moments of quiet to pray in the quiet of our own hearts and then we'll stand to sing and our last hymn in every verse speaks wonderfully of the death of Christ and what his death achieved Romans chapter 8 verse 31 what then shall we say to these things if God is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how he not also with him graciously give us all things 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 who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine as it's written for your sake we're being killed all the day long we're regarded as sheep to be slaughtered knowing all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for I am sure that 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