

A Brand Plucked from the Tree

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[0 : 0 0] Well, please turn with me if you have your Bibles before you. But again, of course, we have a reading on the screen. The book of Zechariah, the prophecy of Zechariah. And as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we're going to go through this book, or certainly selected portions of this book.

When Martin Luther tried to go through Zechariah, he said he was basically, to use the common phrase, stuck. Well, we'll be stuck in many parts.

But God willing, we'll look at some of the visions that Zechariah had, obviously to bring into a present context, an application from what we read in some of these visions anyway.

But we're in chapter 3, Zechariah chapter 3. 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?

[1 : 1 7] 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 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, in 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.

[2 : 3 0] And I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. And 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.

May God bless that reading from his holy and inspired word as we see in that great, not a great section, but great passage, these great words that tell of the one who's rescued, the one who's saved, as a brand plucked from the fire.

Maybe some of you know the translation, a brand plucked from the burning. And four points we want to look at. I'm sure there are many more points that we can take from the passage, but four particular aspects of this passage I want to draw your attention to.

First of all, the rescue from the fire. What is happening when the Lord says to, or says, Oh, the rescued Joshua.

Is this not a brand plucked from the fire? What is that telling us indeed of the great work of salvation? That work of salvation that removes the iniquity, the sin, the power of sin in a person's life.

[3 : 47] And, of course, as we see in our third point when we come to it, what God requires of those who are as brands plucked from the burning. And then finally, towards the end of the passage that we read there, where we see indeed an Old Testament revelation, a revealing of the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, through the whole of this chapter, we see Jesus. And so let's turn to this. As we say, this was the fourth of Zechariah's visions.

The brand plucked from the burning. You know, in many ways, we're living in a time. We're living in a time in history, in the world's history, and even our nation's history, when there are these, we might say these feelings, these feelings of weakness, these feelings of hopelessness that so easily torment the Lord's people.

Because just look around, and you see the church that's battered upon, constantly battered from politicians, from media, from educators, and even happening in the church, the wider church itself, from those who've rejected the Bible's teachings, and, well, things like gender, and marriage, and even the gift of life itself.

Again, look around. Church attendance itself. Minimal. I don't know what the percentage is, but it's a tiny, tiny percentage of Scotland's population who've actually worshipped today, this Lord's Day.

[5 : 32] But it's not just this area. It's not just Scotland. For Scotland, read Great Britain, read Europe, read the world. But, you know, when you focus on circumstances, when your eyes are only on circumstances, then you're taking your eyes of God.

Because God is sovereign. God's our sovereign Lord. God hasn't forgotten his people. He's not forgotten his covenant people. Whether it's his covenant people today, or indeed his covenant people two and a half thousand years ago, at the time that this prophecy was heard and written.

Because what we're seeing here in this prophecy of Zechariah is a time two and a half thousand years ago, there in Jerusalem, after many of the Jewish people had returned from exile, returned from Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem.

And at that time, of course, of course, not simply at that time, but particularly at this time, God's speaking to his people through his prophets. And today, the word of God is still proclaimed, of course, proclaimed by many who've got that privilege to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord.

And so, to be freed from these feelings that mentioned right at the start, these feelings of weakness, these feelings even of hopelessness, what do you do?

[6 : 59] You return to God's word. And even to the prophetic visions that God gave to his prophets, even his prophet Zechariah. And as I said, we're going to look at a sample of these visions that Zechariah had.

He had eight visions altogether. Eight visions that were given to Zechariah from God to comfort God's people and to assure God's people that God is sovereign, that God's in control, that God hadn't forgotten his people.

And as I say, we'll look at a selective number of these visions in order to, yes, to be reassured of God's continued presence.

And above all, to be reminded again, as we see here, not just here, but in other parts of this prophecy, to be more aware of the promises that have been fulfilled, promises of rescue and deliverance fulfilled in a Savior, even the Lord Jesus.

He's mentioned prophetically certainly in this chapter. He was mentioned prophetically all these years before he came to earth, but mentioned to give the Lord's people, even at that time, that sure hope of salvation and that complete deliverance from the enemy of God and the enemy of God's people.

[8 : 23] And so, we continue to be reassured of God's promises being fulfilled, his presence with us, his sovereign power, reassured us as we turn, well, to this fourth of the eight visions.

I suppose it's one of the more well-known visions that we read here in Zechariah, but remember, whether well-known or not, bring them to mind. These are words of assurance or reassurance.

These are words of comfort. These are words of hope. And these are words of power. We're singing of the power of God. And these are words of power, telling of the power of God to save and to deliver.

As we see in the rescue from the fire, verse one, 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.

So, again, let's just remember when this vision is given. It's given when the exiles, or some of the exiles anyway, have returned back to Jerusalem. But it's not just a message for the people of two and a half thousand years ago.

[9 : 33] It's a message for the Lord's people today. And as we go through this vision, we'll see exactly how the words of this vision, the message, is applicable today.

But let's look, first of all, at who's in this vision. There are three characters, three individuals. Three individuals, yes, given at that time, but three individuals mentioned so that we can gain an understanding of the Lord's continued work in the lives of his people today.

But even before we even look at the individuals, we have to think, what's this vision dealing with? What's the bottom line, if you like?

Well, it's dealing with the whole aspect of sin. And it's dealing, yes, with sin, but dealing with the wonderful grace of God. God providing a mediator to speak on the sinner's behalf.

And this message that tells us of that rescue of sinners, rescue by this mediator, rescue from the clutches of Satan. And so that's the overview of this vision.

[10 : 40] How do you apply it? How do we apply it? Well, of course, we need to identify, first of all, who the three individuals are. First of all, we're told, this individual called Joshua.

Now, it's not the more well-known Joshua, you know, that we know of, Moses' successor, Joshua, who led the Israelites over into the promised land. It's not that Joshua.

It's another Joshua. It's Joshua the high priest. And we read of him elsewhere in Scripture, the contemporary prophet of Zechariah was Haggai.

And you read of this Joshua in the prophecy of Haggai. But we know a little bit about him. He was born in exile. He was born in a priestly family. And he returned to his ancestral homeland with these exiles who'd returned.

And we don't really know very much more about him than that. But the point's this. This is Joshua. This is Joshua the high priest. And if he's a high priest, he doesn't just represent himself.

[11 : 45] He doesn't just represent the priests. He represents the people. So what we read here concerning Joshua is going to concern not just himself, but those whom he represents.

We'll come back to that in a moment. But just to be aware, he represents others. He represents the Lord's people. The second character mentioned in this vision, well, you see it there in verse 1.

Verse 1. It's the angel of the Lord. He's second mentioned, but actually he's central to the whole of his vision. And who is this angel of the Lord? Well, we can see from the passage this is none other than the Lord himself.

This is a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus. And you can see that even in the first few verses because the angel of the Lord is mentioned in verse 1. And then in verse 2, all we're told is the Lord.

But it's the same person. It can't be two different people. This is the same person. So the angel of the Lord here or the Lord here, it's central in this whole work of bringing Joshua and all who Joshua represents, bringing them to this great message of encouragement.

[12 : 58] I mean, the people who first heard this vision would be encouraged. And I pray that the more we go through this vision, the more you'll be encouraged. to see exactly what the angel of the Lord does for this Joshua and all whom Joshua represents in rescuing him from this fire.

Because the work of the Lord in relation to Joshua, well, in relation to all whom Joshua represents, well, the work is in relation to the third character, Satan.

Satan, the angel who fell, the prince of darkness, the accuser, well, he's told of that. And the vision, Satan, Satan's no figment of medieval mystery.

Satan is a real person, a real individual. So these are the three characters in the vision. But what do they tell us?

What, the very fact, we've given these three individuals. Well, let's look at them in a little more detail then. Joshua, what's happening? He's standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan's accusing Joshua.

[14 : 09] Now, we're not told specifically what Satan's accusing Joshua of. But certainly when we go through the passage, certainly as we get to verse 3, we can see that there's something not quite right about Joshua.

And Satan's accusing Joshua of being utterly unfit to stand in the presence of the Lord. And if that's the case with Joshua, then it's the case with all whom Joshua represents, all, all the Lord's people.

So that's the accusation. Put it into modern language. In other words, you're not fit. You're not fit to be in the Lord's presence. You're not fit to worship him.

That's the accusation. And of course, that's true. That's a true, true charge. Joshua, utterly unfit to stand before the Lord. Even the priests, not fit.

The people, you and me, utterly unworthy to stand before God. I mean, all of us are utterly unworthy to have any standing before God.

[15 : 17] So does that mean that Satan has the final word, that he's right, that we're lost, that we're going to remain in that terrible condition of not being able to stand before God?

Well, we can say, thanks be to God. No, absolutely not. Because what do we see? We see the angel of the Lord. We see even the Lord Jesus intervening.

Intervening on Joshua's behalf. Verse 2. And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan. The Lord, who's chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you. Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?

I've never preached in this passage before, and yet these are words that are, I think, some of the most encouraging, some of the most heartwarming words that certainly we read in Scripture, certainly even in the Old Testament.

These are some of the most encouraging, soul-lifting, uplifting words that we find. Because, yes, Joshua knows, and the people know, and you know, and I know that, well, yes, we are unworthy.

[16 : 24] None of us are worthy to stand before the presence of the Lord. But are we going to be condemned for all eternity because of our unworthiness? Because of our sin?

Well, yes, because of our sin. Yes, unless the Lord intervenes, as we see here in Zechariah's vision, I mean, the people at the time, they knew that they'd sinned.

They knew that it was because of their sin that God had sent them into exile. So are they going to be condemned for all eternity because of their sin? No.

And I know you know your own sin. We're aware of the sin within our hearts. David the psalmist, he was so aware of his sin. He wrote in Psalm 51, When I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

How many times have we echoed these words even in prayer when we've come before God confessing our sins? But there's hope. There's sure hope. And sure hope, not in ourselves, but sure hope through the Lord's intervention.

[17 : 40] As we see here in the passage, the angel of the Lord, the Lord Jesus himself, he's intervening. And what does he do? He rebukes Satan. He rebukes Satan for suggesting that Joshua's situation, and of course by implication all whom Joshua represents, that somehow Satan's right to say that you're beyond hope.

No, Joshua's not beyond hope. You're not beyond hope. Why? Because as God, the Lord says of Joshua, he's a brand plucked from the fire.

But what's being said here? Well, think of the fire analogy. It's a fire analogy. I mean, well, think of the time this prophecy was given, these words were given.

I mean, in many ways, Joshua and the people, they'd been through the fire of adversity. They'd experienced the fire of God's judgment, God's punishment.

And of course, being in that fire, they didn't have the power or the strength themselves to be out of that fire, to depart from that fire. They would have been utterly lost, utterly consumed, if God hadn't rescued them.

[18 : 55] And in the fire of God's punishment, they would appear, appear like brands, or we might say like sort of blackened sticks, blackened wooden sticks, just about to be destroyed, burned out completely.

But the people were rescued. They were saved from complete destruction because God saved them in his mercy and his grace. It was by God's mercy and grace that Joshua and the people could stand before God.

It was by the power of God, the power of God's redeeming love. Yes, the people were unworthy to stand before him, but they were plucked from absolute destruction because of the divine love of God.

And isn't that the case with every sinner whom God rescues from destruction? You, me, like a brand plucked from the fire, the fire of God's wrath.

Of course, by ourselves, none of us have the power, none of us had the power to be delivered from the fire of God's wrath by ourselves. Utterly helpless, utterly unworthy, yes, unworthy of God rescuing you, rescuing me from that fire.

[20 : 10] But the Lord saved you from his burning wrath. He intervened. And just at the right time, he showed you who are his. He showed you his mercy.

And you were plucked. You were plucked from that burning fire of his wrath. Your blackened heart was changed. Changed through the saving grace, the mercy of God.

And you can relate to that having been plucked from the fire. We'll rejoice. And give thanks again this evening that you've been delivered from that fire.

You've been delivered from his wrath and curse because Jesus intervened, because Jesus took the punishment that you deserve. Jesus plucking you from that burning fire.

But notice too, Satan's been rebuked here when he accused you of eternal unworthiness. You know the deliverance from the power of sin.

[21 : 12] You know that however much Satan might accuse you of not being saved, you know. You know by the confirmation of this Holy Spirit within you that yes, unworthy though you are and were and still are, that you were plucked from that burning fire.

And it's that deliverance that Zechariah saw in his vision that again brings us again to some of the great passages of Scripture that speak of that deliverance, that removal of iniquity.

That's what certainly we see from verse 3. 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. Try and picture in your mind what's just been read there.

That visual picture, that representation that we see here of Joshua the high priest. I mean, when you first see him in the vision, he's not dressed as a high priest.

[22 : 25] The high priest dressed in the finest of garments with all the various jewels that were embedded in the garment. The high priest really looked like a high priest in his garments, his vestments.

No, when we see him at first, he's dressed in filthy rags. And the word that's used here in the original language to describe how Joshua's been presented, it really tells of the most disgusting, disgusting work that's there in Joshua.

And the more you delve into this vision, you see that these, well, that these filthy clothes that Joshua's wearing represent sin. I mean, Isaiah the prophet, he spoke of the sins of the people in just the same way.

Remember? All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags. Well, Joshua's wearing these filthy rags. He's wearing these garments that are absolutely stained with the most disgusting of muck.

And he can't take these clothes off himself. And it's by the Lord's command and the Lord's power that these clothes are removed. And again, bring that to an application.

[23 : 35] The Lord taking these filthy garments off Joshua, telling us that we're absolutely powerless to remove sin from our lives. And it's only by the word of God and the power of God that sin's removed.

You see that in verse 4. Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you and I will clothe you with pure garments. I mean, this is nothing else than the language of salvation and salvation through the finished work of the Lord Jesus.

What does Jesus do? What did he do when you were saved? When you were converted? You were washed clean. Your filthy robes of sin were removed and replaced by the pure robe, the pure garment of Christ's righteousness.

And it's that work of God that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 6. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus by the Spirit of our God.

But the washing clean of a person, washing clean by the work of the Lord Jesus, well, it comes with a need. It comes with the need for you and for me to walk humbly and obediently before God.

[24 : 51] Just as we see here in the passage in the second part of, certainly from verse 6 onwards, verse 5 and verse 6, will we see the requirements that God gives for his people.

I mean, on one level, Joshua's been given new clothes. And as new clothes are given, he's enabled to carry out the work of the high priest. In other words, he's going to honour God.

He's going to show that there's a change in his relationship with God. He's going to walk in the ways that God has given him to walk. And there's this promise here that if Joshua fulfills what God has given him to do, he's going to be blessed in the particular sense with the high priest here.

He's going to be given this position of rule in the temple to regulate the religious life of the community. But we can also see this.

If Joshua represents not just himself but the Lord's people, then surely we're told here of the requirement that God gives for all of God's people to walk in his ways.

[26 : 00] You're transformed by grace. You have that associated requirement to walk in the ways of God. And the promise given, well Joshua was given the promise of rule, ruling in the temple.

And you've got that ultimate promise of reigning, ruling with Christ when the Lord Jesus returns to gather in his people. But again, we can also say this.

If Joshua is to fulfill his office of high priest, the clothes that he is now wearing are going to help him to carry out that role. And if he's promised a position of rule in the courts of God's house, then surely these words point to a greater than Joshua.

Surely these words point to the one true high priest, the once for all high priest, the Lord Jesus. Because Jesus is the ultimate Joshua.

I'm sure you know that the name Joshua itself, the name Jesus rather, the name Jesus is the Greek form for the Hebrew word Joshua. And there's no coincidence here in this, the high priest being called Joshua.

[27 : 09] because remember Jesus, our high priest, Jesus walked, he walked in the ways of God fully and completely and sinlessly.

Jesus fulfilled all that his father had given him to do for your salvation. And he rules, he reigns in the lives and the hearts of his people. Because his rule, his reign is eternal.

And so even in these words you see the promise of the, we might see the ultimate Joshua to come, the Lord Jesus, Jesus, the great high priest. Of course Jesus is our great high priest, he offered himself for us.

High priests, at the time when priests such as Joshua were living, they offered sacrifices. Well, Jesus offered himself as the once for all sacrifice for sin.

Zechariah would intercede for the people. He would be that mediator between God and the people. Of course, Jesus himself is our great mediator, our great high priest.

[28 : 15] And you see that really, I think, the more gloriously even in the last few verses, verse 8 to 10, where we see the Lord Jesus again come forth in that vision, that pre-incarnate vision of the Lord Jesus, this revelation of Jesus.

And I suppose when we read verses 8 to 10, maybe immediately we don't quite fully understand what's been said. We hear words such as branch and servant and stone.

But certainly the people in Zechariah's day would know. They would understand the words that Zechariah was given in this vision. But that's need to say we can't understand them.

They're very much to be understood. Look at what's been said of the servant. I will bring my servant the branch.

Well certainly the people in Zechariah's day would know that Isaiah the prophet spoke of one to come to be the servant of the Lord. Isaiah 42 verse 1, Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, and whom my soul delights.

[29 : 27] And Jesus in his public ministry he quoted from these very words, quoted them about himself. But the people in Zechariah's day also, and again we can apply this to ourselves, they would know that the same Isaiah the prophet, he prophesied of the Messiah to come, could be as a branch, as a new shoot of life as well.

That new shoot, shoot of life fulfilled in Jesus. Isaiah 11 verse 1, There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

We'll come back to that in a moment. But then there's a mention of the stone, the stone that's set before Joshua. I don't understand all the details of that stone, but certainly we can see the principle here, the stone that again surely points to the Lord Jesus.

Again, Isaiah prophesying of this. Isaiah 28 verse 16, behold, I am the one who has laid us a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone.

And it's the same Lord Jesus, the same Lord Jesus who came as that suffering servant, the same Lord Jesus in his human nature who was a branch from the family of Jesse, the family of David, King David.

[30 : 50] And it's the same Lord Jesus who's that foundation stone in which you build your life and life eternal. It's the same Lord Jesus who fulfilled the words here of Zechariah.

When Zechariah talks about iniquity being removed in a single day, well of course, surely that's a, Jesus fulfilled that prophecy when on that particular day when he was crucified.

Jesus bore your sins and removed that sentence of death from you. Jesus brought into fellowship all who are his. Again, that expressed there in verse 10 about inviting his neighbor to come under his vine and under his victory, that fellowship that the Lord enables his people to enjoy.

That fellowship that we all enjoy, certainly in part this side of eternity, but we're going to enjoy in fullness and the glory of heaven. These are words of promise.

These are words of encouragement. And remember, these are words, that were fulfilled in Jesus. I pray that they've been of encouragement to you this evening. As I said, certainly Old Testament prophecies can appear difficult at times, but look at what's said for the purpose of giving the Lord's people that hope, that removal of any kind of sense of weakness and hopelessness.

[32 : 14] And I pray that you've been renewed in hope, that God hasn't forgotten you, he's not forgotten his church, he's not forgotten his people, because he remembers you at all times. He's washed you clean.

And again, back to Isaiah when we see that promise, where Isaiah prophesied when he wrote that though your sins are like scarlet, they'll be as white as snow.

And isn't that really the measure of this message here in this fourth vision that Zechariah was given? I mean, this blessing of knowing that the Lord's people, you who are his, that you're that brand that's been plucked from the fire.

Well, if you know that, rejoice and give thanks and praise to God. Are you that brand though? Are you that brand that's been plucked from the burning? And if you know that you are, that you've been delivered, that you've been rescued, been rescued from the fire of God's burning wrath and rejoice, give thanks, worship him even now, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

But if you're still in that fire, if you're still not being delivered from that fire, oh, cry out to the Lord, call in his name, cry upon him to have mercy upon you, and pray that in his mercy and in his grace, that he'll give you that freedom, that freedom in Christ now, that freedom that's forever.

[33 : 49] Amen. Let us pray. Lord, have mercy upon us as sinners, but we give thanks, Lord, for that mercy, that mercy that rescued all and rescues all who are yours, rescued from that fire.

Lord, we are these brands plucked from the burning, that Lord, may we never take for granted that act of mercy, but rejoice each day in that great salvation.

Hear us, Lord, as we continue in worship before you now. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.