

We Need a Clean High Priest

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[0:00] Amen, the words of the living God. Please keep that page open before you, and let's pray! For his help as we come to it. Father, we thank you. You are the living God, and you have a living word. And so tonight, by your Holy Spirit, we pray that your word would take up residence in us, live in our hearts, change us from within. Lord, we thank you for your Son, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, our great High Priest. And Father, we pray that here in your word, we would learn and know more of him, for we ask in his name. Amen. I don't know if you have vivid dreams very often, but I doubt that many of us have had a night quite like Zechariah's. Our reading tonight is the fourth in a series of eight nighttime visions that the Lord gave to the prophet Zechariah on the same night. So if he didn't have a dream diary before, I'm pretty sure he did now. Normally dreams don't tell us that much, but these dreams were given to Zechariah by the word of the Lord. And when we begin to get our heads around the details, we can see that they tell us really vividly what God was going to do for his struggling people back then. And they speak to us about what God has done and is doing for us today. And tonight we're showing a vision that takes place in two courts, if you like, at the courts of heaven and the courts of heaven on earth. It begins with Joshua, the high priest of the day, standing trial in the courtroom of heaven, being prosecuted by Satan, but being defended and cleansed by the Lord. It ends with the sins of God's people being taken away through the priestly work of Joshua in the courts of the new temple, and ultimately through the one we're told that Joshua points to, the branch. Now the significance of this vision is clear, I think, when we remember that when Zechariah wakes up in the morning, he is going to go with the masses of God's people to keep working away on the building site of the new temple. Zechariah, along with Haggai were prophets who were told in the book of Ezra, were with God's people, supporting them and encouraging them with God's word as they built.

But what use was a sparkly brand new temple if you didn't have a squeaky clean high priest? The reason the old temple was torn down wasn't to do with the cleanliness of the temple. It was because of the sins of the priests and the people. So you couldn't have the old high priests traipsing their sins through the courts of the new temple, or it would be as redundant as the old one. The temple building project was a waste of time, unless it was going to come with a cleaner class of high priests.

And that's just what God is promising here through Zechariah. I think we could put the message of Zechariah 3 like this, clean high priest, clean people. Clean high priest, clean people. A high priest purified by heaven means a people purified on earth. So what is the take-home message for us tonight from this vision? Well, I think it's simply this. We need a clean high priest to serve in the holy places so that our sins are taken away before God.

And the wonderful promise of this vision is that the Lord will provide his people with exactly that. Indeed, a great high priest, as we heard earlier in our service, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. And the take-home application, I think, for us tonight is, as it was for them back then, simply that we need him. We need him.

So let's look then at the two parts of this word from the Lord, beginning with the vision, at a fresh start for the high priest, verses 1 to 5.

[4 : 53] The vision in verse 1 is of a heavenly courtroom. Joshua, the high priest, is in the dock. The angel of the Lord is presiding as judge.

And perhaps surprisingly, we find Satan prosecuting. Now, the devil is called many things in the Bible. Here we have what's not a name, actually, but a title.

Satan means adversary. Because he is not one among many opponents of God and his kingdom. He is the opponent, who stands behind every form of opposition to God and his kingdom.

He's also known as the accuser. And that's just what we see him doing here. There's the high priest, and right there beside him is Satan, standing at his right hand to accuse him.

It's not often you'll hear a preacher say this, but try to get into Satan's thinking here. If he can get the high priest condemned and deposed, then he can bring down all of God's people in one go.

[6 : 03] Because if there's no high priest to serve in the temple, then no one can offer the proper sacrifices. And if no one can offer the proper sacrifices, then no one can come before God and have their sins forgiven.

Satan, as Zechariah will say later in this same book, strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. Take out the high priest, and God's kingdom will fall.

But before Satan can say anything, the Lord has some really strong words for him. Verse T. The Lord, Rebeke, O Satan, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem, Rebeke.

Is not this a brand plucked from the fire? Don't say a word against Joshua. In fact, you've done wrong even to bring him to court, says the Lord.

And the reason is remarkable. He doesn't say, does he, what Pilate will later say of Jesus when he is tried. This man is innocent.

[7 : 14] What wrong has he done? I find no guilt in him deserving death. That is true of Jesus. But that is not what the Lord says of Joshua.

As we'll find out later, it can't be said of Joshua. No, the reason is, verse T, because the Lord has chosen Jerusalem. Satan wants Jerusalem to crumble.

It's as if he's planted a bomb in the temple, and when he sets it off, the explosion will tear the whole city apart, and the nation will crumble. But the Lord wants Jerusalem to thrive.

He wants the temple built. He's chosen this place, these people, as his own. He loves this city. And he loves its citizens. And he's shown that, he says, by pulling them from the furnace of exile.

He says, Joshua representing the people is a brand or a branch plucked from the fire. I'm sure lots of you have had the log burner go in these last few weeks.

[8 : 21] And, you know, when it's really going hot, how quickly can even quite big logs get burnt just to ashes and dust?

And that's exactly what would have happened to God's people when they were taken away into exile in Babylon. Unless God had reached into that inferno of idolatry and persecution and pulled his people out of the flames.

Because even though it was their sin that had put them there. And they had absolutely no right to return back to God, to be in his presence.

Yet God, in his grace, reached into their captivity and brought his people back to his place. Because he had chosen them and set his love upon them.

So really, the Lord's saying to Satan, Do you think I'm going to let you condemn my high priest and ruin my people if I've already rescued them from the punishment of their sins?

[9 : 35] And that is even more amazing when we look at Joshua. Because it's painfully clear that there is plenty that Satan could accuse him of.

Just look at him there in verse 3. Joshua was standing before the angel clothed with filthy garments. The word for filthy there is not like when you go for a walk in the woods.

And get a bit of mud on your boots. Or on your coat, as I did this afternoon. It's like when the baby's nappy explodes up their back and gets on your clothes.

The technical term for that is a punami. And then you turn the baby around and they plaster you with vomit as well. Filthy refers to mess made by bodily substances, shall we say.

Filthy. That's what Joshua's clothes are stained with. That's that smell in the courtroom. And if that is an image you don't want to think about, I'm afraid it gets worse.

[10 : 43] Because the filth on Joshua's clothes is a picture of the sin that stains each one of our hearts. It's a problem if that's what the high priest looks like.

Because that is what we all look like. In and of ourselves before God's holy presence. You don't think the car is that dirty until you pull up next to someone who's just put theirs through the car wash.

And then you see the grime on your bodywork reflected in the gleaming paintwork of the car next to you. And you realize that it is truly filthy.

But you've just gotten used to it and you don't notice anymore. And none of us think of ourselves as someone who's plastered in moral sewage and reeking of sin. Partly because we're so used to it.

Partly because we compare ourselves to other people who are dressed the same. And we comfort ourselves that we have a couple of less stains than that person.

[11 : 57] And tell ourselves not to worry that we too are horrifically stained. But stand before the absolute purity and perfection of God. And every sin shows up in the light of his presence.

Before him we have absolutely nowhere to hide the impurity, the uncleanness of our lives. If you're here tonight and you don't think you're that bad, I'd suggest you need to spend a bit more time in God's work.

Letting it shine its light into the dark corners of your life. But you know, instead of letting Satan point that out in the courtroom. Or pretending that it's not there.

The Lord does something incredible. Have a look, verse 4. The Lord gives Joshua a change of clothes.

But we find out that it's not just clothes. It's a symbol of his sin. Being taken off him, away from him. And being clothed instead in spotless purity.

[13 : 25] So the Lord doesn't just tell the accuser not to accuse. He takes away the grounds for accusation. Look at Joshua now. Not stained with shame.

But clean and spotless. Yes, Zechariah gets into the spirit of the occasion too. Put a clean turban on his head, he says. That was a part of the high priest's work wear.

Because Zechariah, and more importantly the Lord, wants the high priest spiritually clean and ready to get to work in the service of the temple to bring God's word to his people and to bring God's people into the presence of God.

And that is exactly what we still need. And praise the Lord, that is exactly what he has given to us in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before he got to work atoning for anyone else's sins, Joshua would have had to offer sacrifices to cover his own sins. Jesus never needed a sacrifice for himself because he never had any sins to atone for.

[14:39] He had no need, like Joshua, to get changed out of morally stained clothes because he never had a single fleck of sin on him. Every year there was one hair-raising day when the high priest, Joshua, would have gone into the most holy place in the temple with the blood of a goat to satisfy God's anger against his people's sins.

Now, if the high priest was unclean or was compromised in any way, he would die behind the curtain and he would not reappear. But there was one great day in history when Jesus went into the true holy of holies, into heaven, to present his own priceless blood, to satisfy God's anger against all his people's sins for all time.

And such was his purity and his uncompromised holiness that there was never any doubt that he would come back out alive. He walked out of the grave on the third day, just as he said he would.

Death could not hold him. It had no right to him. His resurrection appearances tell us he is the perfectly holy high priest we needed for us to be fit to enter into God's presence.

I don't know if you listen to much music. There's a wonderful album. If you do, if you're going on a long drive, I would download this, okay?

[16:16] A group called Salos. And they've done a few albums like this, but there's one they've done on the book of Hebrews. It's basically the book of Hebrews set to music. And as they compare Jesus with the priests that came before him, they sing these wonderful words.

What we can agree on is this. Jesus is better. Infinitely better. Blameless, spotless, sinless, righteous.

Jesus is better than the Levite priests of the olden days.

His priestly reign will never ever cease. For he is of the order of an ancient priest. Brothers and sisters, what a perfect, supreme high priest we have in Jesus.

And as those lyrics reflect, Jesus' purity makes his high priestly work supremely effective. Because he's perfectly clean, he's perfectly able to deal with our sins before God.

[17:40] Like the Lord did for Joshua, so Jesus silences the devil's accusations when he points his finger at us tonight. Trying to flag up our failings to condemn us, to cause us to live in a cloud of guilt and shame.

Don't say a word against him, against her. I have chosen him. I have bled for her, says the Lord Jesus.

Or as Paul writes climactically in Romans, 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. We do not need to be consumed by guilt over our past or live under a cloud of shame because of our sins.

The devil's accusations do not stick to us anymore. And that is not because Jesus turns a blind eye to our sin or chooses to ignore it.

[18:50] It is because he has taken away our sin as far as the east is from the west, says the psalmist, and they no longer stain us in his sight.

Friends, if your trust tonight is in Christ's high priestly work, his once-for-all atoning sacrifice on the cross, you are no longer wearing the filthy clothes that you used to spend your life soiling.

He has taken those away as far as it is possible from you to get, and instead he has clothed you and covered you in his perfect, spotless righteousness.

There is no stain of sin on him, and so there is no stain of sin on you tonight if you are in him. The father looks on you and he sees the purity of his own son reflected back at him, and he therefore treats you not as your sins deserve, but as he would his one and only son.

What a glorious vision this is of our clean high priest. That is what we needed, and that is exactly what God has given us. Joshua got a fresh start.

[20:11] Jesus didn't need one. He is a perfect high priest for us. And that wonderful vision, it comes with a promise, which we'll turn to now in our second point, a fresh start for an unholly people, verses 6 to 10.

Just have a look at the end of verse 9. We've just seen Joshua's sin taken away. So what will happen when Joshua, and more importantly, the one Joshua points to, the branch, gets to work?

End of verse 9, the Lord says there, I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. So it's the same idea that we saw, isn't it, in verse 4.

Joshua's sins are dealt with, so the people's sins can be dealt with. Clean high priest, clean people. Now verse 6 and 7 are clear that's the result of Joshua's fresh start.

So 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'll give you right of access among those standing here.

[21:21] So Joshua's transformation, it's not just to be an outward transformation, but an inward transformation. His new status before God is to shape his life and his work from then on.

Of course, that should be true, shouldn't it, of anyone who has come to Jesus. If we are justified, then we will be being sanctified, being made more like the Lord Jesus.

But here the focus is specifically on Joshua, because if he does let his new holiness flow out in his day-to-day, walking in the Lord's ways, keeping his charge, the Lord says he'll put him in charge of his temple and he'll have full access to God's presence.

Remember where he is, he's in the courtroom of heaven. So when the Lord says he'll have right of access among those standing here, it's like he's giving him a spiritual key fob into the very throne room of God.

He will have 24-7 access to the very presence of the Lord. And that's just what was needed for the people's sins to be dealt with and them to be brought into the throne room of God.

[22:36] And that's all really very hopeful, isn't it, for the people back then. As they work away on this new temple, which has been a difficult project for all kinds of reasons, what a wonderful promise God's giving through Zechariah that it will be put to its rightful use.

There will be a high priest who can bring them before God, who can make sacrifices to cover their sins, and through whom they can know God truly and personally.

But if that was hopeful, how much more hopeful is this next promise? Often, you know, we have to work hard, maybe, to bring the application from a book like Zechariah to us now.

But here, Zechariah and the Lord, he does that for us. See, in verse 8, he says, Joshua and his friends, who are probably other priests serving in the temple, are not where God's work ends, but they are themselves a sign of something greater.

They point to one the Lord calls my servant the branch. Now, if it sounds strange to call someone a branch, that's already an image that was being used in the Old Testament.

[23:57] The prophet Isaiah spoke about a branch growing from the stump of Jesse. That was King David's father, so he's talking about a new anointed king from the line of David, a promised Messiah.

Isaiah also speaks about a servant who would rule over the nations, but also suffer and die for the sins of his people. So it's that servant, that branch, that Zechariah has in view here.

And with the hindsight that Zechariah didn't have, we know that those promises and predictions are fulfilled, fulfilled in Jesus. He is the green shoot that grew out of the dead stump of the line of David.

He is the servant king who was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. His name actually comes from the same roots as Joshua.

Both mean the Lord saves. And it's with his coming, the coming of the branch, says the Lord, that he will remove the iniquity of the land in a single day.

[25 : 10] About a year ago, Donald Trump began his second term in office, saying that he would end the war in Ukraine on day one of his presidency. But ending a war in a single day was far beyond even the most powerful man on earth to do.

And now imagine somebody saying, tomorrow, I'll deal with the biggest problem that humanity faces.

Just tell me what it is and I'll sort it out in a day. Tomorrow, that's on my agenda. Right, we might think that was a bit strange. Okay, we might laugh nervously, might we?

We know, don't know what it's like in your house, the laundry backlog, okay, getting the car fixed, are all things that you hope might be finished in a single day and often can't be. But friends, God promises here to take away the sins of his people in a single day.

The biggest problem that we have, gone, in one day, that began with a trial and ended in a tomb.

[26 : 24] And in between, the flogging, the mocking, the pain and shame of the cross. In the space of perhaps three hours, from three o'clock to six o'clock in the afternoon, all the sins of all God's people for all of time were taken away in full.

as Jesus hung bleeding and dying upon the cross, he offered up himself as the sacrifice to atone for our sins forever so that before the day was out, he could say, it is finished.

Whoever you are today, you can put your trust in his death for you and have all your sins taken away from you forever. And if we struggle to take that in or wonder if it's too good to be true, the Lord says to Joshua, he'll write it in stone, the stone with seven eyes or seven sides in verse nine, it could be a sort of gemstone that Joshua would wear as he did his high priestly work.

Or it could be an important stone in the temple building, maybe the capstone that would go on at the end, at the top. Either way, the point is that the Lord will engrave this promise in stone for Joshua on a stone that's always before him so that he would always cling to the rock-solid certainty of God's promise that the great high priest will come and when he does, he will save his people from their sins.

And the Lord gives us that certainty too by writing his promise repeatedly in his word for us. There are countless places in the Bible where God tells us unequivocally that Jesus has taken our sins away through his sacrifice.

[28 : 19] Think of John the Baptist. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Or the angel who visited Joseph before Jesus' birth, you will name him Jesus or he will save his people from their sins.

Or Hebrews again, he has no need like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily first to his own sins then to those of the people since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Brothers and sisters, why do we doubt that Jesus' death is enough for us? Is it because God hasn't told us enough times or clearly enough?

Or is it in truth because we believe what's in here more readily than we do what's in here? Some of us will be painfully aware of our ongoing sins, temptations that we would be utterly ashamed for other people to know about, the ways that we fail to walk in the Lord's ways every day.

and we tell ourselves that Jesus can't possibly have done enough to save me. His blood could not possibly cover all of my sins.

[29 : 46] But friends, he has and it does. And the Lord has written that promise in something better than stone for us to cling to. He's written it over and over in the pages of our Bible.

And in the words of the preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones, we need to spend less time listening to the anxieties of our own hearts and more time preaching the truth of the gospel to our hearts.

Heart, who is there to condemn you? Who can bring any charge against you? Christ is the one who's died. Indeed, who is raised, who is at the right hand of God and is interceding for you.

In a moment, we're going to sing these beautiful words that remind us where we need to look when we question whether Jesus' death really is enough for us. When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see him there who made an end of all my sins.

Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

[31 : 04] And the very final verse of our chapter confirms that that justifying work is not only theoretical or a kind of accounting trick, but is taking our sins away actually frees us to know the real joy and blessing of the Lord.

That idea of inviting one another under the vine or under the fig tree, it's an image of paradise, the world set right. You know, imagine somebody in a war zone being told, you know, in the summer you'll be able to have everyone over for a barbecue, the sun will be shining, you'll have plenty, you won't have to fear about the bombs dropping, you can enjoy God's goodness freely.

So the Lord is saying, once I've taken away your sins and ended the war between you and me, then you will know true freedom, love, joy, peace, together as my people.

And as much as we rightly long for that in heaven, we don't have to wait until then because we have a taste of it here and now in the church.

Brothers and sisters, we are the new temple that Christ has built and where he, the branch, dwells and serves. We have had our sins removed by his death, he's giving us peace with God.

[32 : 30] And so now together we can enjoy the Lord's goodness with thankfulness in our hearts as his family together. and all because of the finished work of our perfectly clean and holy high priest Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let's praise him together as we pray and then as we sing his praise. our Father in heaven, how we thank you for giving us the very high priest that you knew that we needed, that we could not provide for ourselves, for giving us a righteousness that we could not earn, for clothing us in a spotless robe that we could not make ourselves.

Oh Lord, we could not take away our sins, but you, the one against whom we have sinned, did it for us. And we stand in awe of you and of your grace and mercy and love.

Father, we pray that we would be absolutely convinced as we go into this new week that Christ has done it, that we can come before your throne freely, boldly, without shame, without fear.

Father, pray for those who as yet don't have that confidence. Lord, pray that they would find it in your word and that by your spirit you would grant them that assurance of faith.

[34:15] And Father, we pray for those among us who as yet have not taken that step of trusting in the finished work of Jesus. We pray, Lord, that they would see in him everything that they truly need to come before you, that they would indeed take hold of him by faith and become yours forever.

We thank you, Lord, that that is possible through Jesus Christ. And so we pray in his name. Amen.