**Jesus, The Cleansing Servant Branch**

Text: Zechariah 3:1-10

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**Scriptures:** Hebrews 9:11-15; Zechariah 3:1-10

*Suggested song of response: STTL439 ‘God of grace’*

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 8 of 19. 4th night vision

**Theme:** Zechariah sees a vision of Joshua the high priest, justly accused by Satan of sin, being symbolically cleansed and forgiven by God foreshadowing the Branch yet to come

**FCF:** We can believe that our sin is too great to be forgiven by God in Christ

**Proposition:** In Christ, our sin is removed and we are clothed in His perfect righteousness

**Introduction**

As the opening credits of a movie unfold sometimes the story begins with a wide angle shot. The camera starts well away from the focus of the film. Then the images bring you closer to a scene which sums up the central point. This is what we’ve been seeing in the first part of the book of Zechariah.

Notice the movement in these night visions: in the first the prophet views a shady valley outside the city, in the second he sees the building site of the new city. Whereas in this, the third, he is inside the Temple courts where he sees Joshua the High Priest.

The previous three visions have all been encouraging – God was again amongst His people, intending to comfort and proper them.

The question answered by this 4th vision is “How could the Lord bless the people after all they had done?” After all it was their sin which had led to the exile in Babylon and as we have already seen on their return there remained the need for them to repent. 70 years in captivity had not removed their sin. They had married outside the covenant community (Ezra 9:1-10:17), they had put a higher priority on serving themselves than on building the Lord’s house (Haggai 1:3) and as we saw in the 6th vision last week, there were thieves and liars amongst the people.

1. **The filthy are accused (3:1-3)**

Have you ever been to a civil trial? In the courtroom you’ll see the judge, prosecution, defence, you’ll hear the evidence, this will be considered by the judge (and jury for more serious offences), judgement will be passed ‘guilty/not guilty’ and if guilty there will be a sentence – a fine or imprisonment.

In this 4th vision Zechariah sees a courtroom scene. Joshua the high priest is there. He is the grandson of the last high priest before the temple was destroyed (2 Kings 25:18; 1 Chronicles 6:14-15; Ezra 3:2). He represents the people before the throne of God. However, he was born in exile, he was brought up in a defiled land. Joshua the high priest is now on trial. He stands in the dock awaiting God’s righteous judgement.

Look at verse 3 to see what Joshua looks like. *Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel.* The Hebrew word ‘filthy’ (tso’im) is from the same root as the term for human excrement (Deut 23:13; Eze 4:12). If you could smell this high priest, he would have the stench of raw sewage. Here he stands before the Lord God whose eyes are too pure to look upon sin (Hab 1:13), representing not only himself, but as high priest, also all God’s people.

Remember that on the Day of Atonement, before the High Priest could enter the holy of holies, he needed to put on clean, sacred linen garments in order to symbolise the need for the mediator to be holy (Ex 28:42-43 cf. Ps 24:3-4). Now here stands Joshua, dressed in soiled garments symbolising not only his sin, but the sins of the people. We find the same dirty imagery of the people in Isaiah 64:6a: “*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*”. Filthy here is a different word, not human excrement, but menstrual cloths. Slightly different words but having the same meaning: unclean. Unsuitable for presentation before God.

It’s hard for us to really grasp the shock and horror of this image. Here is Joshua, the holy priest, standing in the presence of God looking and smelling like human faeces, unclean waste products excreted by the body. We discreetly dispose of these substances privately, behind closed doors. Here they are in full view; before the holy face of God.

The worst job I’ve ever done on the farm was not pulling dead lambs out of their mother’s bodies, not killing or butchering sheep, not pulling box thorns from my son’s leg with a pair of pliers but cleaning out blocked sewage lines by hand. This is truly dirty, smelly work which made me want to vomit. It’s enough to put you off plumbing for life!

To come before the Lord God Almighty, who is holy, holy, holy, covered in human excrement is more than a disgrace, it is utterly unthinkable. That is the message of this vision: Joshua should not be there!

Here Joshua is like the guest in the parable which Jesus told of the wedding banquet. Someone turns up who was not wearing wedding clothes and is asked the question (Matthew 22:12) 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' Then Jesus says, “The man was speechless”. Like Joshua in this vision, he had nothing to say in his defence. "Then (in the parable) the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Satan is the accuser, the adversary – In Hebrew ‘hassatan’. (cf. Job 1:6-2:7) He is there to prosecute Joshua, the defendant. Not a difficult task, he simply has to point to the filthy state of Joshua’s clothes. This man is clearly unfit to stand in the presence of God. Notice that Joshua has nothing to say in his defence. There is no way he can help himself. This looks like being a very very short trial. Case closed. Defendant guilty as charged. Throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

But wait, look! The Angel of the Lord acts in Joshua’s defence. He is the Lord himself - as the Scripture says: The LORD said to Satan “the LORD rebuke you”. Satan, the accuser is the one being reprimanded. The defence is totally disarmed. But how?

God gives the reason why Satan is to be rebuked. It is because God has chosen Jerusalem. He has made a decision to select the people Joshua represents and claim them for himself, despite the truth that sin still clings to them. This is expressed in the words “*Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?".* The phrase “a brand (a burning stick) snatched from the fire” echoes Amos 4:11 which tells of some Judeans who were narrowly rescued from God’s destructive judgement. The idea is that of being pulled out at the last possible moment before being consumed by the flames.

In reality this happened to 6-year-old John Wesley when he was rescued from a fire in the family’s old rectory home just moments before the roof collapsed. His testimony throughout his life was that he was indeed ‘*a brand plucked out of the fire’*, being rescued by Jesus Christ from the fires of hell.

Think back for a moment to your own past. Are there things you have done, said, or thought that you are deeply ashamed about? Things that if there were to be spoken about in this holy assembly would cause us all to be shocked? Things you hope will never come out into the open because then you would be deeply humiliated. People would see that you are not the tidy, almost-perfect Christian that you (and I!) appear to be when we worship the Lord together?

Joshua represented the OT people of God, returned from exile in Babylon. This vision of him standing dirty before our pure God pictures you and me! Like him you are naturally a filthy person with no defence.

Yet, if your faith, your trust, your life is in Christ – you are surprisingly, amazingly, wonderfully chosen by God. Elect. Chosen by God from before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4).

If dirty, how can God’s chosen people stand in the presence of their pure God?

1. **The filthy are cleansed (3:4-7)**

Joshua has been snatched from the fires of hell itself, that place of outer darkness, utterly separated from God because God has chosen him and the people he represents. In his mercy the Lord has turned in kindness to this man who is filthy with his own sin and the sin of the people.

Now look at what happens! Joshua’s filthy clothes are replaced with rich garments (Hebrew: mahaloth). These are ‘festival clothes’, robes of state. This is attire suitable for standing in the presence of the King of Kings. The clean turban symbolises the removal of guilt – both his and the people he represents (cf. Lev 16:3-22).

Here in this vision, Joshua is symbolically clothed by God in righteousness. He is like the anointed One described in Isaiah 61:10 “I *delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*”.

Here Joshua represents all God’s blessed people throughout all history who come collectively as the Bride of Christ cleanly dressed to the wedding of the Lamb (Rev 19:8) – “*Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear*." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

You may know that this symbolic redressing of Joshua was reflected in early church practice in the 1st 2 centuries when elaborate preparations were made for new believers who were to be baptised and to profess their faith publicly. They were called ‘catechumens’. They received biblical instruction, they fasted, and they were carefully questioned by the church leadership to ensure that they knew in whom they believed. At Easter time these catechumens were led to a small pool enclosed by curtains. They entered the water naked, leaving behind their old garments, and were baptised. Afterwards they were anointed with oil and clothed in fresh white linen garments (Rev 3:4-5; 7:9-17). For the remainder of the Easter week, they attended worship services in their new white linens.

This early church baptism and professional of faith practice, reflecting the redressing of Joshua the High Priest, vividly pictures justification (‘just as if I had not sinned’) before God. Notice that Joshua does not do anything. It is the angel who is instructed to “take off his filthy clothes”. It is the Lord who explains the significance “See, I have taken away your sin”. It is the Lord who gives him the new clean garments and dresses him in them. He does absolutely nothing! This is a profound picture of purifying grace.

Here is the comfort of the good news of the Bible: No filthy history, whether national, personal (or congregational) is beyond the reach of God’s redemptive work in justification.

But see clearly here that once justified, the cleansed sinner must wholeheartedly strive to stop sinning. Notice here that the good works of the child of God follow on from God’s prior grace.

Joshua has been cleansed, now He is charged by the Angel of the Lord to obey the following:

Firstly, Walk in the Lord’s ways. Live your life with a complete commitment to God’s revealed character and declared will

Secondly, keep the Lord’s requirements. Perform the holy rituals laid down for priests.

Summing up these two: be a faithful high priest!

Now comes the surprising part: Then you will have my authority to rule – to “govern my house” and have “charge of my courts”. Then you will be a co-worker with God’s angels in serving him. If faithful, Joshua would gain entry, not merely to the holy of holies, but he would also have direct access to God Himself ‘among those who are standing here’ – that is the heavenly beings who wait on God.

Was Joshua completely faithful to his calling to walk in the Lord’s ways and to keep his law? Are you? Do you think that Joshua, once cleansed would stay unsoiled?

Children, have you ever played outside in your ‘church clothes’ and got them muddy, grass-stained or even ripped on a branch or on some gravel? My ‘church suit’ is starting to show some signs of wear, even though I try to look after it and only wear it on ‘special occasions’, especially when I come to worship with God’s people.

We are like our clothes, aren’t we? Even when we have been cleansed, forgiven, when we are right with God, we go off again and get dirty again. Don’t you find this to be so in your life? Is there any lasting benefit in being cleansed, if you’re just going to become filthy again? Romans 7:24 “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

But wait, there is more! Joshua is **not** **our** high priest!

1. **The Branch is Promised (3:8-10)**

**v8** *'Now listen, Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who are sitting in front of you-- indeed they are men who are a symbol, for behold, I am going to bring in My servant the Branch’.*

The last section of this vision clearly looks forward to things to come. Joshua the high priest is told that he and his priestly associates are symbolic. They point forward as a sign to someone else who God will bring in the future: His servant, the Branch.

The image of the Servant (Isa 42:1; 49:3; 5; Eze 34:23-24) appears first in the pre-exilic time of the Isaiah and prophesies someone who will bring redemption to His people (52:13; 53:8), through his suffering (53:4-11).

The image of the Branch is that of a king in the line of David (Isa 4:2; 11:1; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 6:12). The Branch had already been prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah as a righteous kingly ruler, a descendant of David, who would come in the future (e.g. Jer 33:14-16). God had promised that he would raise up a righteous descendant for David who will reign with justice and will establish salvation for his people. The Branch is not Zerubbabel the governor, the grandson of the King Johoiachin, the last king of Israel who was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar. Zerubbabel was a contemporary of Zechariah, The Branch is someone who was yet to come at the time God gave this vision.

There is also a stone which is set before Joshua in v9. This stone with 7 pairs of eyes in may be an allusion to the high priest’s ephod and breast piece, which together hold fourteen stones or to the omniscience of the Messiah. However, notice that it is set in front of Joshua, rather than a gemstone which might be placed on his ‘rich (priestly) garments’. The context of the rebuilding of the temple strongly suggests that this stone is symbolic of that construction work. This is supported by Zech 6:12-13: “*Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.*'

Here the themes of this vision are brought together. The Branch is a kingly ruler who is also a priest and it is this promised person who will build the temple of the Lord and bring in a holy kingdom for His people. The seven eyes on the stone represent the all-seeing, all-knowing watchfulness of the Lord God Himself whose promise to ‘remove the sin of this land in a single day’ is engraved on the stone to indicate the permanence of the promise of complete cleansing for his people.

Zechariah and the people back then, 2500 years ago, would have been left wondering who this person who would cleanse the land could be. We know, don’t we! It is so clearly the Lord Jesus Christ the son of Mary, adopted by Joseph, descended from king David. He is the Branch. The One who came not to be served by to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). He is the Servant. The One whose own body is the Temple of God, torn down and rebuilt again 3 days later when he rose from the dead. This vision points forward to wonderfully to the Christ who truly cleanses His people.

You see, child of God, it is not Joshua who stood in filthy clothes before God representing you as your high priest. No, beloved brother or sister, it was Jesus! “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21)

Christian, Jesus God’s own son, pure and true, hung in your filthy excrement; so that you could be clean and right before God. He became the ugliest of the ugly, so that you could be beautiful and precious in God’s sight. He became poor so that you could have a share in the wealth of his kingdom.

When Christ came as high priest in human flesh, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, the temple of his body. He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. All this took place within single day. At Calvary, when the symbol of this vision became a reality.

For this reason, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance-- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the covenant of works – requiring a faithfulness which neither Joshua, you nor I can achieve.

Brothers and sisters, our uncleanness is removed, and we are clothed in righteousness through the ministry of our great high priest, Jesus (Gal 3:26-27; Eph 4:20-24).

By his grace, God takes us and justifies us, re-clothing us in borrowed robes of righteousness that enable us to approach the throne of grace. Satan’s charges against God’s elect are ruled out of order. Our accuser is silenced.

v10 *'In that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'every one of you will invite his neighbour to sit under his vine and under his fig tree.'"* Expresses in OT terms theperfect peace, security and abundance we have before God, cleansed and clothed in the pure righteousness of Christ.

AMEN.