

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Lesson 4: Clean Garments and the Branch -- Zechariah 3:1-4:14

Imagine standing in a courtroom where the verdict has already been whispered against you before a word is spoken. You know what you have done. Your clothes are filthy, stained past any hope of cleaning, and everyone can see it. At your right hand stands a prosecutor who knows your record by heart and recites it with relish, pointing his finger, naming every failure. You have no defense. You open your mouth and nothing comes out, because every charge is true. This is exactly where Zechariah's fourth vision opens, and the man standing there in his shame is not a villain. He is Joshua, the high priest, the holiest office in the land, and even he stands speechless under the accuser's pointing finger.

Then something happens that the prosecutor never expected. The Judge does not weigh the evidence and pronounce a sentence. The Judge speaks, and what He says is not addressed to the accused at all. He turns to the accuser: 'The Lord rebuke you, O Satan.' And then, in front of everyone, He gives the order: 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' And to Joshua, trembling and undeserving, He says the words that change everything: 'Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.' The filthy clothes come off. Clean robes go on. A clean turban is set on his head. The man who walked into that room condemned walks out covered, cleansed, restored, and the accuser has nothing left to say.

If you have ever felt the weight of your own record, the failures you cannot scrub away, the voice that whispers you are too far gone, then this vision is for you. It is one of the clearest pictures in all the Old Testament of grace, of God Himself doing for guilty people what they could never do for themselves. And it does not stop with one man's clean garments. God immediately points beyond Joshua to someone greater: 'Behold, I will bring my servant the Branch.' He speaks of an engraved stone and a single day when He will remove the iniquity of the whole land. Zechariah's people did not yet have a name for the Branch. We do. His name is Jesus.

Then the vision shifts to a golden lampstand blazing with light, fed by two olive trees, and a discouraged builder named Zerubbabel who is staring at a mountain of obstacles and a temple that looks impossibly small. To him comes one of the most quoted sentences in the Bible: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.' Read these two chapters slowly. They press two truths into the tired and guilty heart: God cleanses what we cannot, and God accomplishes through His Spirit what we could never manage by our own strength. Do not despise the day of small things, Zechariah says, for the God who silences the accuser is the same God who finishes what He starts.

Group Discussion: In the vision, Satan stands ready to accuse Joshua, and Joshua has no defense, yet God Himself silences the accuser and removes the guilt (Zechariah 3:1–4). Where do we hear the voice of accusation today, whether from our own conscience, from others, or from the enemy, and why is it such good news that the verdict over a forgiven person rests with God and not with the accuser?

Personal Reflection: God said to Joshua, ‘I have taken your iniquity away from you’ (3:4), while the filthy garments were still being removed. Is there a sin or failure from your past that you have confessed to God but still carry in your heart as if the filthy garments were never taken off? What would it mean to truly believe that God has clothed you instead?

Read Zechariah 3:1–4:14

Study Questions

1. The vision opens with Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord while Satan stands at his right hand to accuse him (3:1). What does this scene reveal about the reality of accusation against God’s people, and about the One before whom we ultimately stand? What does it tell us that even the high priest, the holiest office in Israel, stands there in filthy garments?
2. Joshua stands in ‘filthy garments’ (3:3) with no defense to offer and no word to say. When you honestly consider your own record before a holy God, where are you tempted either to minimize your filthy garments or to despair of ever being clean? Which of those two errors do you lean toward, and why?
3. Rather than addressing the accused, the Lord turns to the accuser and says, ‘The Lord rebuke you, O Satan’ (3:2). What does it mean that God Himself silences the accuser on behalf of His people, and how does this shape the way we understand the security of those whom God has chosen to forgive?

4. God ordered the filthy garments removed and said, 'I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments' (3:4). Where in your life are you still trying to clean your own garments by your own effort, performance, or guilt, instead of receiving the cleansing God offers? What would change if you let God clothe you instead?
5. After cleansing Joshua, the Lord gives him a charge: 'If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge' (3:7). How do God's gracious cleansing and His call to faithful obedience fit together here? Why is it a mistake to set grace and obedience against each other, as if receiving one cancels the need for the other?
6. The clean turban was placed on Joshua's head, restoring him not just as a forgiven man but as a servant with renewed purpose and access (3:5, 7). Think of an area where past failure has made you feel disqualified from serving God. How might God be calling you, like Joshua, to step back into service as a cleansed and restored person?
7. The Lord calls Joshua and his fellow priests 'men who are a sign' and announces, 'Behold, I will bring my servant the Branch' (3:8). Why does God point beyond the cleansing of one man to a coming Servant, and what does it suggest that the forgiveness pictured here was always meant to lead the eye forward to something, and Someone, greater?
8. To discouraged Zerubbabel, facing a mountain of obstacles and a temple that looked far too small, God says, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit' (4:6), and 'Do not despise the day of small things' (4:10). Where are you tempted to measure God's work by visible size and human strength? What small, seemingly insignificant act of faithfulness might God be calling you to value and continue?

9. God promises, 'I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day' (3:9), and unveils 'my servant the Branch' (3:8), the engraved stone, the priest who builds the temple (compare 6:12-13). Gather the threads of this vision: who is the Branch, how is this Messianic promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ the priest-king who builds the true temple, and how does the 'single day' on which God removes iniquity find its fullness at the cross? What does it mean that the temple He builds is now His church, and that the cleansing first pictured for Joshua is the cleansing offered to us in Christ?
10. Look back across the whole vision, from the accused man in filthy garments, to the clean turban and pure vestments, to the Branch, to the lampstand burning by God's Spirit. Name one specific way the Lord is forming you through this passage: where is He calling you to receive His cleansing, silence the accuser's voice with His verdict, or trust His Spirit rather than your own strength this week?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 61:10, rejoicing because God has clothed us with garments of salvation; Romans 8:31-34, no condemnation because the One who died and rose now intercedes for us; Revelation 12:10-11, the accuser of the brethren cast down and overcome by the blood of the Lamb; Jeremiah 23:5-6, the righteous Branch raised up for David, the Lord our righteousness; Ephesians 2:19-22, believers built together into a holy temple in the Lord by the Spirit.

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