

A Brand Plucked *From the Fire*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Zechariah 1–3, Rev. 12:10, Exod. 3:2–14, Eph. 2:8–10, John 14:15.*

Memory Text: “Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment” (*Zechariah 3:4*).

However easy to forget, the great controversy between Christ and Satan is the ultimate driving force behind reality. Wars, crime, violence, and the whole seething and boiling cauldron of human tragedy are but surface manifestations of the underlying conflict that began in heaven (*Rev. 12:7*), a universal struggle that impacts not just every human but all creation (*Rom. 8:20–22*).

One thing, though, we must never forget. The great controversy isn’t over Middle East oil or over the epochal geopolitical shifts in the military and economic hegemony. It’s over the salvation of the human race, one soul at a time. Nations come and go, power structures come and go, grand themes of history and ideology come and go; only the saved, those covered in the robe of Christ’s righteousness, last forever. Satan doesn’t care about money, power, politics, not in and of themselves—he cares about souls, about taking as many down to ruin with him as possible. Christ, through His death, has made it possible to save everyone from that ruin. The essence of the great controversy is, at the core, people choosing eternal ruin or eternal life. All the rest is essentially fluff.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 28.*

Zealous for Jerusalem

Read Zechariah 1, 2. Though you might not understand all the details and symbols, what is the message the Lord is giving to His people here? What is the background to these events? What clear biblical principles are seen in these chapters, what promises are made, what hope is offered to the Lord's people, and on what conditions? How are these same principles manifested among us today, regardless of how different our immediate circumstances are in contrast to the situation depicted in Zechariah?

Although Jerusalem lay in ruins because of the conquest of the Babylonians 70 years earlier, God provided hope for the future of the city. Zechariah received the message from the Lord that not only the temple but Jerusalem would be rebuilt.

Zechariah began by declaring to his listeners that the Lord had been displeased, “sore displeased,” with their fathers. But Zechariah immediately gave courage to those who were listening by assuring them that if they would turn to God in humility and repentance, He would turn to them (*Zech. 1:1–3*). Zechariah’s visions were meant to give strength and inspiration to continue the building of the temple in Jerusalem for the worship of God.

Following the first vision of Zechariah, recounted in chapter 1, the Lord gave some incredible encouragement, saying, “I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy” (*vs. 14*).

And then this: “ ‘Therefore, this is what the Lord says: “I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem,” declares the Lord Almighty’ ” (*Zech. 1:16, NIV*).

The man with the measuring line portrayed the plans for the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in Zechariah’s time. But with only the foundations laid, the building of the temple seemed like an impossibility.

Just before Zechariah’s vision of the filthy garments of Joshua, he received a message of promise to communicate to the Jews, recorded in Zechariah 2:10–13. God told them to “sing and rejoice,” and then He promised to live with them. How encouraging that message must have been as the people of God attempted to join together to worship Him.

The Accuser and the Accused

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him” (Zech. 3:1, NIV). What grand and important truths, especially in the context of the great controversy (and in the immediate context of the vision itself), are revealed here?

A few crucial points are powerfully represented here. First, who is the accused but Joshua, the high priest, who stands as a representative of all God’s people. Pictured in this vision as a priest facing the Lord, Joshua represents Israel in all their faults, shortcomings, and sins. There is no question: the people are not innocent, they are not sinless, they are not deserving of the promised restoration that the Lord is offering them and which they are claiming for themselves by faith and repentance.

And, of course, Satan is there to accuse them, to argue against their repentance, their desire to reform, and their desire to find the mercy and grace of God. What better way to discourage people in the great controversy than to make them think their sins are just too great for the Lord to forgive? How many souls, all through history, and even today, have fallen prey to this—one of Satan’s most wicked devices? What makes the threat so powerful is that he doesn’t have to lie about our sins, does he? All he has to do is remind us of them and, without knowing about God’s grace, we would be crushed with a sense of hopelessness and loss. Even without an accuser to throw them up in God’s face, our sins are more than enough to condemn us.

The Hebrew verb translated here as “accuse” comes from the same word as “Satan”; it’s the same three Hebrew consonants that form the foundation for both words. No question, Satan is the accuser, but we all should know the famous text: “And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night” (*Rev. 12:10*).

Though it is not good to dwell on our sins, at times we need to take a hard and honest look at ourselves (regardless of whether or not Satan is whispering in our ears). What changes must you immediately choose to make in your life, and what Bible promises can you claim in order to make those promises real and effective? Think of what’s at stake if you allow sin to dominate you.

The Angel of the Lord

So far, in Zechariah 3, we've focused on two personages, Satan and the high priest Joshua. But there's a third personage, clearly the central figure in the narrative: "the Angel of the Lord" (*NKJV*).

Who is "the Angel of the Lord"? See *Exod. 3:2–14, Zech. 3:1, 2*.

What we see here, in a graphic form, is a microcosm of the great controversy, a battle that is waged over every soul who has given his or her life into the hands of Jesus, the Lord, in faith and repentance. Remember the context: Israel, severely chastised, "humbled themselves before God, and returned to Him with true repentance."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 468. It was at this time that Satan's work as the accuser was revealed. What exactly he said, we aren't told, but given biblical history and given what we know about human nature, it probably wasn't a pretty picture.

Read Zechariah 3:1–3. What does the reality of Joshua's garments tell us?

The fact that Joshua as the high priest was deemed the one in filthy garments only highlights the depth of sin. From the earliest days of the covenant between God and Israel, the priesthood as a whole, the Levites, and the high priest in particular were special even among the chosen nation, called out by the Lord for a unique role and function in Israel, a holy role and function (*Exod. 38:21, Num. 1:47–53, 3:12*). They, of all Israel, should have been, symbolically, in the cleanest of garments.

All that aside, the rest of the chapter makes it clear that, despite their past, despite their shortcomings, "the Angel of the Lord" is there to defend them against the accusations of Satan, regardless of how true or false those accusations are. The Angel of the Lord, Jesus, is there to save and redeem. This is, without exception, the most important truth in all Scripture.

How crucial that we never forget, regardless of our unworthiness, the role of "the Angel of the Lord" in our behalf. How can we keep this truth before us at all times, yet not deceive ourselves by drawing false conclusions from it? What might some of those false conclusions be? Be prepared to discuss your answer in class on Sabbath.

Change of Clothes

Read prayerfully and carefully all of Zechariah 3; look at the steps in the process. This is how God’s people, though sinners, are saved. What can you learn about the plan of salvation through the vision here?

In verses 3–5, before the new clothes are placed on Joshua, the old filthy ones are removed. According to the text, that means that the Lord has “ ‘removed your iniquity from you’ ” (*vs. 4, NKJV*). What, though, does that mean in the life of the person redeemed? Was Joshua now sinless, perfect in heart and soul and mind, never to fall or sin again? Was that the state Joshua had to reach before the change of garments could be placed on him? If so, what hope would any of us have?

Instead, what it means is that the guilt and condemnation that belonged to him had been taken away. Talking about Joshua here, Ellen G. White said, “His own sins and those of his people were pardoned. Israel were clothed with ‘change of raiment’—the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. The miter placed upon Joshua’s head was such as was worn by the priests and bore the inscription, ‘Holiness to the Lord,’ signifying that, notwithstanding his former transgressions, he was now qualified to minister before God in His sanctuary.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 469.

What does “the Angel of the Lord” say to Joshua in verse 7 *after* the change of clothes, and why is that order so important?

It was only *after* the special clothing was given to him that Joshua received the admonition to obey the Lord and walk in His ways. This point mustn’t be overlooked—the righteousness of Christ was granted to him by faith, was credited to him apart from his walking in “[God’s] ways” or from keeping “[God’s] command.” Without being covered in those “ ‘rich robes’ ” (*Zech. 3:4, NKJV*), all his efforts to obey God’s commandments and to keep His “ways” would have left him in the same filthy garments he started with.

“An Effectual Plea”

In the world of Christianity, many people have not experienced the robe of righteousness and do not understand its potential. However, this concept is absolutely vital to anyone who wishes for peace and joy in his or her relationship with his or her Lord.

Too often, there’s a motivation to do good so that we can be saved. The message here in Zechariah should show us that is not how it works, nor how it can work. Again, here’s Ellen G. White on what was happening in this vision: “But while we should realize our sinful condition, we are to rely upon Christ as our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. We cannot answer the charges of Satan against us. Christ alone can make an effectual plea in our behalf. He is able to silence the accuser with arguments founded not upon our merits, but on His own.”—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 472.

That last sentence should become emblazoned in the hearts of all of God’s people, a truth that we must know not only intellectually but experientially, learning to rely moment by moment, not on our good works, no matter how good they really are, but only on the merits of Christ. Or to put it in David’s words: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (*Psa. 32:1*).

Keeping what we have seen in Zechariah 3 in mind, read Ephesians 2:8–10, John 14:15, and Romans 6:1–4. How do these verses help us understand all that is involved in what we have been shown in Zechariah about what it means to be wearing “rich robes”?

Now that Joshua was covered in the garments of holiness, his life was to reflect that holiness. We are to exert all the God-given power offered the soul to have victory over sin. No sin should be tolerated or excused in our lives, not when there are so many promises of victory for the one who has given himself or herself to Christ. Christ’s life proved we can live in obedience to God’s law. When we sin, we are *choosing* to sin. How important that we always think long and hard on the implications of that choice.

What are the sins you especially struggle with? What promises can you claim so that you can have the victory over them through Christ?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White Comments, pp. 1092, 1093, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4; “Joshua and the Angel,” pp. 582–592, in *Prophets and Kings*; “Shall Not God Avenge His Own?” pp. 169, 170, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Joshua and the Angel,” pp. 467–476, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5.

“When Satan seeks to cover the people of God with blackness, and ruin them, Christ interposes. Although they have sinned, Christ has taken the guilt of their sins upon His own soul. He has snatched the race as a brand from the fire. By His human nature He is linked with man, while through His divine nature He is one with the infinite God. Help is brought within the reach of perishing souls. The adversary is rebuked. . . .

“Notwithstanding the defects of the people of God, Christ does not turn away from the objects of His care. He has the power to change their raiment. He removes the filthy garments, He places upon the repenting, believing ones His own robe of righteousness, and writes pardon against their names on the records of heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 169, 170.

“As the people of God afflict their souls before Him, pleading for purity of heart, the command is given, ‘Take away the filthy garments,’ and the encouraging words are spoken, ‘Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.’ Zechariah 3:4. The spotless robe of Christ’s righteousness is placed upon the tried, tempted, faithful children of God. The despised remnant are clothed in glorious apparel, nevermore to be defiled by the corruptions of the world.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 591.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s final questions.
- ❷ Dwell more on the fact that it was only after the change of garments that Joshua was given the command to obey. Why is that so important to remember? What does this tell us about what our salvation is based upon, as opposed to what the results of that salvation are? Why must we always understand that distinction?
- ❸ Think of the good news that we can be given a whole new change of clothes, regardless of how filthy our garments have been. What should that mean to you in your own life, your own attitudes, your whole way of looking at the world and others, knowing that you have been granted this completely new set of clothes, which reveal the new life offered to you in Christ?

Fishers of Men

by BENJAMIN D. SCHOUN

Sri Lanka is a beautiful island that lies in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, off the southern tip of India. For 30 years the nation was wracked by civil war, but at last peace has come, and the people can once more hope for a better life. Farmers can plant their rice crops without fear, and men can go fishing in the rich waters that surround their island.

But another threat has risen, a threat to religious freedom. Recently the government of Sri Lanka has passed a law forbidding religious conversions. Now anyone caught distributing religious material risks being convicted of a crime. How can the 3,600 Seventh-day Adventists living on this island share God's love with others without risking their lives, their jobs, and their future? How can they invite people, as Jesus did, to "follow Me"?

Two brothers who make their living fishing in the sea near their home bought a small radio to listen to as they sit for long hours in their boat. One day while searching for something of interest to listen to, they came across a station they hadn't heard before. It was a message of hope, a message of God's love.

Day after day they listened to programs on this newly discovered station, which identified itself as Adventist World Radio. They responded to the messages of hope and peace and accepted Jesus as their personal Savior.

They shared what they were learning with their families, and during the long hours out in their boat, these brothers turned up the volume on their little radio so that the men fishing nearby could enjoy the message, as well. Their favorite program was called *The Voice of Hope*, and the words of hope warmed the hearts of many who listened as they fished.

As fellow fishers asked the brothers questions, the new believers grew bold. They organized a prayer group, and several who have come have found hope and life in the gospel of Jesus. Now, in spite of the new legal restrictions, these men ask for literature and Bibles so they can study and grow in their faith and knowledge of Jesus.

Please pray for these modern-day fishers of men and all the believers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world where the devil seeks to slow the Lord's work. Your mission offerings help support the work in difficult places.

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