

## **God's Plans for His Leaders**

### **Zechariah 3:1-4:14**

What's it take for a child to be convinced their parents have their best interests at heart?

- Letting them have whatever toys they want?
- Letting them eat junk food whenever they like?
- Letting them stay up as late as they like?
- Taking them to the movies?
- Taking them to Disneyland?
- Letting them stay home from school?

Are those things in the best interests of the child? Children think so. Children think it's great to be self-centred and have their every whim met immediately. But is that really what's good for them?

Children don't have the maturity and experience and general knowledge of the world to know what's best for them. They may not think money grows on trees, but they still think there should be an unlimited supply to spend on them. Part of the parenting process is not only to have the best interests of the child at heart, but also to teach them what's right and wrong; what's important and unimportant; what's good for them and not good for them.

What would it take for God to convince you He had your best interests at heart?

- Let you have whatever toys you want?
- Let you eat plenty of junk food without the bad medical side effects?
- Let you stay up to watch TV every night?
- Give you enough money so you didn't have to work?

What's in your best interests? Are you the one to decide

that? Do you have enough maturity and experience and general knowledge to know what's best for you? Or would you be better off trusting God – letting Him teach you what's best?

Zechariah 3 and 4 are two visions given to Israel in 520BC. They're part of a series of eight visions – we looked at the first three last week and we'll look at the last three next week. Israel faced a number of difficulties at this time. They'd only just got back in their own land. Some 70-80 years earlier, they were captured and taken off to a foreign land – to Babylon. But now they were allowed to return home – except home no longer seemed all it was cracked up to be. They returned to ruins and tough conditions. They may very well have wondered if God had their best interests at heart. Why didn't God do better for them?

These eight visions talk about what God will do. The two we're looking at today, focus on the two leaders: Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor – the human instruments God'll use to sustain the community in the tasks He's given them to do. God makes promises about what He thinks is important for His people. As we look at these promises, I think it's worth remembering that God's priorities for our good don't always correspond to what we think His priorities should be.

### **Cleansing the High Priest**

The fourth vision – the first one we're looking at today – focuses on Joshua the high priest. 3:1

*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. The Lord said to Satan, "The*

*Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"*

*Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.*

Zechariah's shown a courtroom scene.

- God's the judge. He's the One hearing the case.
- Satan's there as the prosecuting attorney. He's ready to bring his accusations against the accused.
- And the prisoner's Joshua – the high priest. He's the one in the dock. He's being accused.

And it seems his defence attorney didn't do a very good job. Instead of telling his client to get all spruced up and dressed in his best suit so he can make a good impression on the judge, he's turned up in filthy clothes. He looks like he's slept at the tip and crawled through the sewers to get to court. He turns up looking guilty.

But he's not declared guilty. Verse 4:

*The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes."*

*Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."*

*Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by.*

God graciously intervenes and rescues the prisoner.

What's going on here? It's important to realise who Joshua is. He's the high priest. He's the community's spiritual leader. He's the one who represents the people in the temple. He's responsible for making sacrifices for them. He's responsible for representing them before God.

If he loses this court case, what hope do the rest of the people have? How will the nation cope if their representative goes down? Who'll officiate in the rebuilt temple?

And what's the case about? It's not just about whether you have a bath and put on a suit before fronting the judge. These filthy clothes represent sin. You can see it in the second half of verse 4. When the filthy clothes are removed, Joshua's told:

*See, I have taken away your sin.*

Joshua's guilty. He hasn't always treated God as God. The people he represents are guilty. They haven't always treated God as God.

The exile demonstrated that. God was so sick of them treating Him with contempt – their sin was so great – He sent them as captives to a foreign land. He said: That's enough.

- But did the exile fully pay for their wickedness? Of course not.
- And did the exile remove their sinful nature? Again, no.

They returned to the land and they knew some important lessons. They put behind them some of the extremes of their wickedness – their blatant idolatry, their ritual prostitution, their imitation of the pagan nations. But they were still far from perfect. How can they stand before a holy God? How can they be involved in His work?

Yet, God declares Joshua a saved person. He's like a stick saved from the fire of judgment. His filthy clothes are removed and he's given clean clothes. God won't pronounce him guilty – which is great news for Joshua and great news for the rest of the community. But how

can this happen?

- Is Joshua actually not guilty? No – for God saw him in the filthiness of his sinful clothes.
- Is Joshua to turn over a new leaf and live a perfect life from now on? No – he's not capable of doing that and, besides, that wouldn't make up for his previous wrong.
- Is Joshua to do some great feat or some special religious act to make up for his great filthiness? Again no – Joshua does nothing in this scene. He just stands there. Everything that happens is done to him.

The clue comes in verse 8:

*"Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it," says the Lord Almighty, "and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day."*

Zechariah's not the first to refer to the Branch. Isaiah 11:1

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

Jeremiah 23:5

*"The days are coming, declares the Lord,  
"when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,  
a King who will reign wisely  
and do what is just and right in the land."*

Jeremiah 33:15 says much the same thing. Ezekiel 34:24 and 37:24 refer to My servant David as one who will come to rule over the people.

Joshua's return to the priesthood – and God's acceptance of him to that position – is confirmation that God's not abandoned His promises. The exile's a terrible disaster – but it won't prevent God achieving His purposes. He'll still send His promised Messiah – His Servant from the line of David; His Branch who'll rule His people. Joshua is a sign to the people – a sign that God's still moving forward in His promised purposes.

The stone's a bit more difficult. Part of the difficulty is the word translated *eyes*. You can see the NIV has a footnote that says it could be translated *facets*. It's also possible to translate the word as *fountains* or *springs*. So that's quite a few possibilities.

- What sort of stone has eyes?
- What sort of stone has springs?

It's much easier for us to think of a stone with facets – a precious jewel that's shaped to reflect the light. And so, perhaps we could think of such a jewel being placed on Joshua's turban – which may help to explain Zechariah's interruption earlier. The inscription would be a reminder that God had removed their sin – a reminder that Joshua served before God only because God cleansed him.

That's one possibility. Others link it with one of the two stones clearly connected with the Messiah in the New Testament.

- One's the stone the builders reject which becomes the cornerstone for God's new temple. Jesus is the foundation for God's new people – especially in His death and resurrection.
- The other's found in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Paul identifies Jesus as the rock who accompanied Israel in

their wilderness wanderings – the One who provides living water for His people.

This stone in verse 9 is not totally clear. Different people suggest different possibilities. Yet, I'd suggest the overall message of this vision remains quite clear. These two images – the Branch and the Stone – point to what God's going to do:

*I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.*

The big problem this people have – the big problem we still have – is our sin. It's evil. It's offensive to God. It's the puny creature telling its Creator to get lost. It's me, as one of God's creatures, failing to truly treat God as God. It deserves God's just judgment. But that judgment is disastrous for me. I deserve it, because I've done the crime. But the consequences are terrible.

Yet, God promises to do something about it for us. I can't remove my sin. Nor can I do anything to make up for it. But what I can't do, God promises to do for me – and, from my current perspective in history – has now done. It's not that God ignores the sin. Rather, He takes it from us – He removes it from the land. The way He does that is by placing it on Jesus instead. He's God's Servant, the Branch. He suffers God's judgment in our place – as our substitute – and thus removes sin in a single day. It's a great thing God's done for us – amazing generosity – removed our guilt. We can now stand before God cleansed – no longer fearing we'll be condemned. All that's necessary for us to be accepted by God has been done for us.

Could there be a greater gift than that? Could there be

anything that was more in our best interests? Yet, so many live as if they'd rather God gave them a bigger house instead. They're more interested in some trinkets than having a right relationship with God.

### **Empowering the Governor**

The fifth vision turns to another of Israel's leaders – the governor, Zerubbabel – although Joshua's not totally absent from it. Zechariah 4:1

*Then the angel who talked with me returned and wakened me, as a man is wakened from his sleep. He asked me, "What do you see?"*

*I answered, "I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left."*

*I asked the angel who talked with me, "What are these, my lord?"*

*He answered, "Do you not know what these are?"*

*"No, my lord," I replied.*

And nor will he find out for a few verses. For the angel does not answer his question straight away.

Instead, verse 6:

*So he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty.*

*"What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'"*

*Then the word of the Lord came to me: "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that*

*the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.*

*"Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel."*

We'll come back to those first few verses in a minute – when we get to their explanation in verse 11. Let's first look at this stuff to do with Zerubbabel. In 538BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a decree that permitted the Jews to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem. Nearly 50,000 Jews took up that offer. They headed back to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel led them. According to Ezra 3, they had the foundations of the new temple completed within a couple of years. But then things stopped. Another 15 years went by and nothing much happened – until God sent Haggai and Zechariah in 520BC.

Why did things stop?

- On the one hand, it was a big task. Jerusalem was in ruins. There was a pile of rubble everywhere. Some of it was usable; some of it wasn't. And life was tough. They had to set up their own homes amidst the rubble. They had to get the farms going. They had limited resources. They themselves weren't a huge number of people.
- On the other hand, there was opposition. Not all the surrounding nations were happy about Jerusalem being rebuilt. Some had a vested interest in not seeing the temple constructed again. They put a number of obstacles in the way of the people.

So the mighty mountain that faced Zerubbabel may be literal, a huge pile of rubble to sort through – or it may be symbolic of these influential people with their political clout opposing what's happening.

God's word to Zerubbabel is that he'll finish the task. The mountain will be swept away – whether that be the pile of rubble or the trouble caused by the opposition or whatever else stands in his way. The final stone to complete the building will be put in place. The people will celebrate this great event.

How will it all come about? God will do it. If you look at the resources available, there's not much hope. The building materials aren't that crash hot – they've been through a fire. The building personnel available aren't that crash hot either – they're tired and discouraged. They struggle to get on with the task. They struggle with the opposition. But God will empower His people for the job. The central message of these words is that the temple will be completed – but it won't come about by human drive or ingenuity or strength; it'll come about through the Spirit of God. He's the One who'll get the temple up and running again.

I think this is how the vision of the lampstand fits in. We're given a fair bit of detail about this lampstand back in verse 2. Unfortunately, the details are a bit obscure in the Hebrew text – which results in quite a range of different possible pictures as to how this lampstand is set up and to how exactly it's connected to the olive trees. In the long run, I don't think it matters much what the lampstand looked like. It's not the focus of the explanation.

The only explanation we're given is in verse 14:

*So he said, "These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth."*

That's referring to the olive trees – not the lampstand. So,

who are the two anointed ones? In the context, the most likely candidates are Joshua and Zerubbabel – the leaders God provides for His people.

- Joshua, as high priest, would have been anointed to that position.
- Zerubbabel, coming from the royal line of David, would have been entitled to be anointed as the Davidic ruler over God's people. It's unlikely he was, in fact, anointed to such a position – but he would have been entitled to.

So, they're anointed by God and they, in turn, supply the oil for the lamp. Being living olive trees, it means there's an ongoing supply of oil for the lamp. It will never go out. What's the lamp? The text doesn't tell us. The angel fails to provide an explanation.

- Some suggest it represents the rebuilt temple.
- Some suggest the ongoing witness of the people to God – either in general or through what happens at the temple.

I think it's tied up with the community as a whole. It's about how God will sustain them in the work God's given them – through the leaders He's provided; through the prophets who bring His word; through His Spirit.

Where does that leave us? Zerubbabel was able to finish the temple. God enabled him to do that. But it was far from glorious. It wasn't a patch on Solomon's temple. While there's celebration at its completion, there's also sadness. They'd been looking forward to the great things God would do for them – a glorious future to surpass what God did for them in the past – but the reality was that life was but a shadow of the reign of Solomon. Everything seemed so small and mundane.

But it's a vision of what's to come. As the vision about Joshua pointed to the day of the Messiah when God would remove sin in a single day, so this vision about the rebuilding of the temple points forward to what God would do when the Messiah comes. The two anointed ones pointed forward to the Messiah – some expected two Messiahs: a priestly one and a kingly one. Jesus is both.

- He's our great high priest who's offered the perfect sacrifice for us that cleanses us from sin once for all and allows us free access into God's presence.
- He's the Davidic King who's raised from the dead and now rules over God's kingdom and brings His people within that glorious rule.

And, as such, He pours out His Spirit on His people in continual supply. He connects us to God. He enriches our lives. He enables us to live for Him. He enables us to witness for Him. The Spirit of God is essential for the work of God's kingdom.

And is not Jesus God's true temple? And is not Jesus now building us into His temple brick by brick. Peter writes (1 Peter 2:4):

*As you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

And verse 9:

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*

And how was it all achieved? Did human strength and power bring it about? Was it done by human cleverness and ingenuity? Did we humans come up with this great scheme of how we could get round the problem of God's judgment? No – it's God who did it and God who continues to do it.

### Conclusion

These two chapters are a great picture of the good things God had in store for His people – amazing things; generous things. They're a great picture of the good things God's done for us in Jesus.

- The forgiveness of our sins.
- The being brought into His kingdom.
- The empowering of His Spirit.

The New Testament puts it this way:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* (Ephesians 1:3)

*He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:32)

God's done these great things for us. God's got our best interests at heart.

We're tempted to doubt that. We don't doubt it in relation to our forgiveness. We're quite happy to agree with God when He says He's got our best interests at heart when He forgives us. But we doubt it in relation to other things God says. We think we know better than Him what will please us – what's best for us as we live our daily lives. We're tempted to think of Him as a policeman, hiding along the highway, waiting to jump out at us and spoil our fun.

- We think we'll be happier if we spend our time doing what we want to do rather than what God's made us to do.
- We think we'll be happier if we spend our money buying what we want to buy rather than what God wants us to buy – or that maybe God wants us to give it away.
- We think we'll be happier if we can build up our own reputation and make a name for ourselves and strut our own pride and arrogance rather than trying to honour God and building up His reputation.

Think about what God promised through Zechariah. Think about what God gave us in Jesus. He's been very generous to us. He's done great things for us. How could we doubt that He's got our best interests at heart? How could we think that He's not good in what He wants for us?