**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ZECHARIAH-003. A VISION OF JUDGMENT AND CLEANSING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And he shewed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him. 2. And the Lord said unto Satan, The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire? 3. Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the Angel. 4. And He answered and spake unto those that stood before Him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him He said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. 5. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the Angel of the Lord stood by. 6. And the Angel of the Lord protested unto Joshua, saying, 7. Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, If thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep My charge, then thou shalt also judge My house, and shalt also keep My courts, and I will give thee places to walk among these that stand by, 8. Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, thou, and thy fellows that sit before thee: for they are men wondered at: for, behold, I will bring forth My servant The BRANCH. 9. For behold the stone that I have laid before Joshua; upon one stone shall be seven eyes: behold, I will engrave the graving thereof, saith the Lord of Hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. 10. In that day, saith the Lord of Hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig-tree."*

*Zechariah 3:1-10*

Zechariah worked side by side with Haggai to quicken the religious life of the people, and thus to remove the gravest hindrances to the work of rebuilding the Temple. Inward indifference, not outward opposition, is the real reason for slow progress in God's work, and prophets who see visions and preach repentance are the true practical men.

This vision followed Haggai's prophecy at the interval of a month. It falls into two parts--a symbolical vision and a series of promises founded on it.

**I. The Symbolical Vision (vs. 1-5).**

The scene of the vision is left undetermined, and the absence of any designation of locality gives the picture the sublimity of indefiniteness. Three figures, seen he knows not where, stand clear before the Prophet's inward eye. They were shown him by an unnamed person, who is evidently Jehovah Himself. The real and the ideal are marvellously mingled in the conception of Joshua the high priest--the man whom the people saw every day going about Jerusalem--standing at the bar of God, with Satan as his accuser. The trial is in process when the Prophet is permitted to see. We do not hear the pleadings on either side, but the sentence is solemnly recorded. The accusations are dismissed, their bringer rebuked, and in token of acquittal, the filthy garments which the accused had worn are changed for the full festal attire of the high priest.

What, then, is the meaning of this grand symbolism? The first point to keep well in view is the representative character of the high priest. He appears as laden not with individual but national sins. In him Israel is, as it were, concentrated, and what befalls him is the image of what befalls the nation. His dirty dress is the familiar symbol of sin; and he wears it, just as he wore his sacerdotal dress, in his official capacity, as the embodied nation. He stands before the judgment seat, bearing not his own but the people's sins.

Two great truths are thereby taught, which are as true to-day as ever. The first is that representation is essential to priesthood. It was so in shadowy and external fashion in Israel; it is so in deepest and most blessed reality in Christ's priesthood. He stands before God as our representative--And the Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all. If by faith we unite ourselves with Him, there ensues a wondrous transference of characteristics, so that our sin becomes His, and His righteousness becomes ours; and that in no mere artificial or forensic sense, but in inmost reality. Theologians talk of a communicatio idiomatum as between the human and the divine elements in Christ. There is an analogous passage of the attributes of either to the other, in the relation of the believer to his Saviour.

The second thought in this symbolic appearance of Joshua before the angel of the Lord is that the sins of God's people are even now present before His perfect judgment, as reasons for withdrawing from them His favour. That is a solemn truth, which should never be forgotten. A Christian man's sins do accuse him at the bar of God. They are all visible there; and so far as their tendency goes, they are like wedges driven in to rend him from God.

But the second figure in the vision is the Satan, standing in the plaintiff's place at the Judge's right hand, to accuse Joshua. The Old Testament teaching as to the evil spirit who accuses good men is not so developed as that of the New, which is quite natural, inasmuch as the shadow of bright light is deeper than that of faint rays. It is most full in the latest books, as here and in Job; but doctrinal inferences drawn from such highly imaginative symbolism as this are precarious. No one who accepts the authority of our Lord can well deny the existence and activity of a malignant spirit, who would fain make the most of men's sins, and use them as a means of separating their doers from God. That is the conception here.

But the main stress of the vision lies, not on the accuser or his accusation, but on the Judge's sentence, which alone is recorded. The Angel of the Lord is named in verse 1 as the Judge, while the sentence in verse 2 is spoken by the Lord. It would lead us far away from our purpose to inquire whether that Angel of the Lord is an earlier manifestation of the eternal Son, who afterwards became flesh--a kind of preluding or rehearsing of the Incarnation. But in any case, God so dwells in Him as that what the Angel says God says and the speaker varies as in our text. The accuser is rebuked, and God's rebuke is not a mere word, but brings with it punishment. The malicious accusations have failed, and their aim is to be gathered from the language which announces their miscarriage. Obviously Satan sought to procure the withdrawal of divine favour from Joshua, because of his sin; that is, to depose the nation from its place as the covenant people, because of its transgressions of the covenant. Satan here represents what might otherwise have been called, in theological language, the demands of justice. The answer given him is deeply instructive as to the grounds of the divine forbearance.

Note that Joshua's guilt as the representative of the people is not denied, but tacitly admitted and actually spoken of in verse 4. Why, then, does not the accuser have his way? For two reasons. God has chosen Jerusalem. His great purpose, the fruit of His undeserved mercy, is not to be turned aside by man's sins. The thought is the same as that of Jeremiah: If heaven above can be measured ... then I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done (Jer. 31:37). Again, the fact that Joshua was a brand plucked from the burning--that is, that the people whom he represented had been brought unconsumed from the furnace of captivity--is a reason with God for continuing to extend His favour, though they have sinned. God's past mercies are a motive with him. Creatural love is limited, and too often says, I have forgiven so often, that I am wearied, and can do it no more. He has, therefore he will. We often come to the end of our long-suffering a good many times short of the four hundred and ninety a day which Christ prescribes. But God never does. True, Joshua and his people have sinned, and that since their restoration, and Satan had a good argument in pointing to these transgressions; but God does not say, I will put back the half-burned brand in the fire again, since the evil is not burned out of it, but forgives again, because He has forgiven before.

The sentence is followed by the exchange of the filthy garments symbolical of sin, for the full array of the high priest. Ministering angels are dimly seen in the background, and are summoned to unclothe and clothe Joshua. The Prophet ventures to ask that the sacerdotal attire should be completed by the turban or mitre, probably that headdress which bore the significant writing Holiness to the Lord, expressive of the destination of Israel and of its ceremonial cleanness. The meaning of this change of clothing is given in verse 4: I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee. Thus the complete restoration of the pardoned and cleansed nation to its place as a nation of priests to Jehovah is symbolised. To us the gospel of forgiveness fills up the outline in the vision; and we know how, when sin testifies against us, we have an Advocate with the Father, and how the infinite love flows out to us notwithstanding all sin, and how the stained garment of our souls can be stripped off, and the fine linen clean and white, the priestly dress on the day of atonement, be put on us, and we be made priests unto God.

**II. The remainder of the vision is the address of the Angel of the Lord to Joshua, developing the blessings now made sure to him and his people by this renewed consecration and cleansing.**

First (verse 7) is the promise of continuance in office and access to God's presence, which, however, are contingent on obedience. The forgiven man must keep God's charge, if he is to retain his standing. On that condition, he has a place of access among those that stand by; that is, the privilege of approach to God, like the attendant angels. This promise may be taken as surpassing the prerogatives hitherto accorded to the high priest, who had only the right of entrance into the holiest place once a year, but now is promised the entrée to the heavenly court, as if he were one of the bright spirits who stand there. They who have access with confidence within the veil because Christ is there, have more than the ancient promise of this vision.

The main point of verse 8 is the promise of the Messiah, but the former part of the verse is remarkable. Joshua and his fellows are summoned to listen, for they are men which are a sign. The meaning seems to be that he and his brethren who sat as his assessors in official functions, are collectively a sign or embodied prophecy of what is to come. Their restoration to their offices was a shadowy prophecy of a greater act of forgiving grace, which was to be effected by the coming of the Messiah.

The name Branch is used here as a proper name. Jeremiah (Jer. 23:5; 33:15) had already employed it as a designation of Messiah, which he had apparently learned from Isaiah 4:2. The idea of the word is that of the similar names used by Isaiah, a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a Branch out of his roots (Isaiah 11:1), and a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground (Isaiah 53:2); namely, that of his origin from the fallen house of David, and the lowliness of his appearance.

The Messiah is again meant by the stone in verse 9. Probably there was some great stone taken from the ruins, to which the symbol attaches itself. The foundation of the second Temple had been laid years before the prophecy, but the stone may still have been visible. The Rabbis have much to say about a great stone which had been in the first Temple, and there used for the support of the ark, but in the second was set in the empty place where the ark should have been. Isaiah had prophesied of the tried corner-stone laid in Zion, and Psalm 118:22 had sung of the stone rejected and made the head of the corner. We go in the track, then, of established usage, when we see in this stone the emblem of Messiah, and associate with it all thoughts of firmness, preciousness, support, foundation of the true Temple, basis of hope, ground of certitude, and whatever other substratum of fixity and immovableness men's hearts or lives need. In all possible aspects of the metaphor, Jesus is the Foundation.

And what are the seven eyes on the stone? That may simply be a vivid way of saying that the fulness of divine Providence would watch over the Messiah, bringing Him when the time was ripe, and fitting Him for His work. But if we remember the subsequent explanation (4:10) of the seven, as the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole earth, and connect this with Revelation 5:6, we can scarcely rest content with that meaning, but find here the deeper thought that the fulness of the divine Spirit was given to Messiah, even as Isaiah (11:2) prophesies of the sevenfold Spirit.

I will engrave the graving thereof is somewhat obscure. It seems to mean that the seven eyes will be cut on the stone, like masons marks. If the seven eyes are the full energies of the Holy Spirit, God's cutting of them on the stone is equivalent to His giving them to His Son; and the fulfilment of the promise was when He gave the Holy Spirit not by measure unto Him.

The blessed purpose of Messiah's coming and endowment with the Spirit is gloriously stated in the last clause of verse 9: I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. Jesus Christ has once for all made atonement, as the Epistle to the Hebrews so often says. The better Joshua by one offering has taken away sin. The breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel, stretched far beyond the narrow bounds which Zechariah knew for Israel's territory. It includes the whole world. As has been beautifully said, That one day is the day of Golgotha.

The vision closes with a picture of the felicity of Messianic times, which recalls the description of the golden age of Solomon, when Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree (1 Kings 4:25). In like manner the nation, cleansed, restored to its priestly privilege of free access to God by the Messiah who comes with the fulness of the Spirit, shall dwell in safety, and shall be knit together by friendship, and unenvyingly shall each share his good with all others, recognising in every man a neighbour, and gladly welcoming him to partake of all the blessings which the true Solomon has brought to his house and heart.