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SATAN PROSECUTES ONLY THE RIGHTEOUS!

Today's Text: Zech. Chap. 3

Extracts:

Then he (the angel) showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a branch plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes." ... So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him [Zech. 3: 1-5]

*Article 11(1) of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** [1948] states, "Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence."¹ This presumption derives from the Latin legal principle, "ei incumbit probatio qui dicit, non qui negat" (the burden of proof rests on who asserts, not on who denies).² So, in most countries of the world, you are presumed innocent in criminal cases until you are proved guilty. The burden is on the prosecutor to find the evidence which must be factual. In order to win, the prosecutor must prove his/her case beyond reasonable doubt. It is no wonder that many criminals bury as much damaging evidence as possible so as to get away!*

The converse of that principle is to presume the suspect guilty until proved innocent. In that case, the burden is on the accused to prove his/her innocence. That is the one used by Satan. He knows that we as sinners have no proof of innocence since all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory! So, how can we win in Satan's court? How can we escape his grip?

Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study.

¹ 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Declaration_of_Human_Rights

² 'Presumption of innocence,' From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocent_until_proven_guilty

1. Background: Joshua is placed on trial

We continue this week with the story of the Jewish exiles that had returned after seventy years in Babylon to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The group was led by Zerubbabel who became the governor of Judah, with Joshua as the high priest [**Hagg. 1: 1**]. Two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, worked with them to encourage them to complete the reconstruction of the temple in spite of stiff opposition from some local politicians [**Ezra 5: 1**].

In a vision, Zechariah saw Joshua the high priest before God with “Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him” [**Zech. 3: 1**]. Joshua was clothed with filthy garments as he stood before the Angel of the Lord [**v. 3**]. Remember that God is invisible. When you find the expression, “Angel of the Lord,” in the Old Testament, it refers to God taking human form. We know from the New Testament that God incarnate is Jesus Christ. That is why the Angel of the Lord is regarded as the pre-incarnate Christ, the Lord that visited Abraham (with two angels) [**Gen. 18: 1-3**] and spoke with him about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah [**vv. 17-33**]; the Son of God who was in the fiery furnace with Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego in Babylon [**Dan. 3: 25, 28**], and the Son of Man in Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days [**Dan. 7: 13**]. So, Zechariah’s vision depicts Satan bringing charges against Joshua the high priest, as the “*accuser of our brethren who accuse(s) them before our God day and night*” [**Rev. 12: 10**].

In Satan’s legal system, you are guilty until you are proved innocent. Of course, he knew that Joshua could never prove his innocence. He was clothed with filthy rags, representing his sinful nature and, therefore, his guilt. Satan was there in the Garden of Eden where he engineered the fall of man [**Gen. 3: 1-24**]. He knew that from that point on, there would be no human being that could be free from sin. However, God had also promised there that the “Seed” of the woman [**v. 15**] would rescue mankind from Satan’s grip. Zechariah’s vision was a foretaste of the redemptive work of the coming Messiah whose temple was being reconstructed at the time.

By Joshua’s own effort, he could not plead his innocence before Satan. So, the Angel of the Lord (the pre-incarnate Christ) rebuked Satan and reminded him that He had chosen Jerusalem as “a branch plucked from the fire.” Then, He commanded those standing before Him to remove Joshua’s filthy garments, The Lord said to the high priest, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you; and I will clothe you with rich robes” [**Zech. 3: 2, 4**]. So, they put a clean turban on Joshua’s head and clothes on his body, and the Angel of the Lord said to him, “If you will walk in My ways, and if you will keep My command, then you shall also judge My house.” He added, “I am bringing forth My Servant the BRANCH, for behold, the stone that I have laid before Joshua, upon the stone are seven eyes ... and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day” [**vv. 8-10**].

Speaking of this Branch, Isaiah prophesied, “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” [Is. 11: 1]. In the island of Patmos, the apostle John saw a vision of heaven where an elder told him about “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,” “a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth” [Rev. 5: 5-6]. Isaiah listed the seven Spirits of God as follows [Is. 11: 2]:

1. The Spirit of the Lord
2. The Spirit of Wisdom
3. The Spirit of Understanding
4. The Spirit of Counsel
5. The Spirit of Might
6. The Spirit of Knowledge and
7. The Fear of the Lord.

God knew that the only way that He could set us free from Satan’s system of law was to send His only begotten Son, Jesus, to be tried in our place and pay the ultimate price of condemnation and death on the cross. Zechariah’s vision was a forerunner of that coming event. The trial of Jesus will make the point more vivid.

2. Satan prosecutes the Righteous One!

Roman law was based on the principle of “innocent until proved guilty” [Acts 22: 25], which was similar to Jewish law [Jn 7: 51]. That was why Barabbas was put in prison only after trial for rebellion and murder [Lk 23: 19]. Yet, Jesus was arrested on Thursday night. By nine o’clock Friday morning, He had already been tried, condemned and crucified [Mk 15: 25]! How many courts do you know that sit after office hours? Even though the trial judge, Pilate, had concluded, “You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And in deed, *having examined Him, in your presence, I have found no fault in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; no, neither did Herod... and in deed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him*” [Lk 23: 14-15], he still sentenced Him to death. The truth is that Jesus had been presumed guilty even before the trial began! For example, Caiaphas, the high priest that year had said, “It is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish” [Jn 11: 49-50].

Satan does not come looking ugly but as an angel of light. During the trial of Jesus, he came in various forms, all of them pretty. For example, he came through the Jewish leaders who believed that they were defending the Law of Moses [Jn 19: 7], and through Peter’s cowardly denial, to scare off the disciples from defending their Master [Lk 22: 31]. He deceived Judas Iscariot to betray Christ [v. 3], using Judas’ thinking that he could thereby hasten the establishment of Christ’s earthly kingdom. Satan instigated the Roman rulers, represented by Pontius Pilate, to believe that Jesus was a threat to their empire by His claiming to

be the King of the Jews [Lk 23: 1-2].. Jesus knew Satan’s plan and God’s purpose. Therefore, He never attempted to defend Himself. Can a cockroach get justice in the court of hungry cockerels? That was why the only questions that Jesus answered were those that would hasten His crucifixion. For example, when the Jewish leaders asked Him if He was the Christ, the Son of God, He replied, “You say that I am.” The council concluded that they needed no further evidence of His guilt [Lk 22: 66-70]! When Pilate asked Him if He was the King of the Jews, Jesus replied, “It is as you say.” But when Pilate asked follow-up questions, “He answered him nothing” [Lk 23: 3-9]!

By the time that Satan knew his victory was short-lived, Jesus had already “disarmed principalities and powers” and “made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” [Col. 2: 15]. With His blood shed on the cross and in the body of His flesh through His death, Jesus the Christ has now presented us “*holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight*” [Col. 1: 20, 22]. As the pre-incarnate Christ did for Joshua the priest, so has Jesus the Christ, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world [Rev. 5: 6] done for us. Has Satan given up after failing with Jesus? No! Instead, he is still pursuing those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” [Rev. 12: 17]. He is still after the righteous!

3. How Satan prosecutes the righteous

Just as law enforcement agencies never give up pursuing criminals and bringing them to justice, Satan also never gives up pursuing the righteous, that is, sons and daughters of God by faith in His Son, Jesus [Jn 1: 12]. Satan pursues them by one or a combination of the following ways:

a) *Temptation*

Many believers are desirous to remain faithful to God but Satan tempts them *continually* to see if he can derail them. He works through the lust of the flesh or the lust of the eyes or the pride of life [1 Jn 2: 16].. For example, a young man who is moving up in his career soon finds attractive young women trying to win his attention. If he is single, he can be drawn into fornication and promiscuity. If he is married, he may soon be tempted into adultery and divorce. A woman in a leadership position may soon find her head swollen as Satan works on her mind to demonstrate being the tough boss over men. A person of faith who finds himself in charge of huge public funds may be tempted by economic hardship to start stealing with his pen. How many people have been disgraced out of office, if not jailed for corrupt practices?

Recall, for example, what Joseph had to bear in the home of an Egyptian army officer, Potiphar [Gen. 39: 1-23]. His master saw that God was with Joseph because he became more successful and more prosperous from the

time that Joseph came into his house. So, he made Joseph “overseer of his house and all that he had.” In fact, he did not know what he had “except for the bread that he ate.” Joseph was “handsome in form and appearance.” So, all of a sudden, his master’s wife “cast her eyes on Joseph” and she told him to lie with her! Joseph refused and said to her:

Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?

The temptation continued “day by day” but Joseph refused to succumb. How many of us can do that? Satan never gives up. Through Potiphar’s wife, he never did. One day, as the woman tried to seize Joseph, he ran away and left his garment in her hands. She used it as evidence that he had tried to rape her. For that, Joseph was sent to jail! Satan will not stop pursuing you as long as you remain faithful to God. Temptation is hard. That is why Jesus has taught us to pray to His Father by saying, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” [**Matt. 6: 13**].

b) Persecution

That you have won one battle against Satan does not mean that the war is over! He keeps coming back, each time with bigger weapons. As in the case of Joseph, for example, he was framed and wrongfully put in prison. There are many innocent people on death row in many countries around the world. Some people have been disgraced out of office because of false allegations or evidence against them. Your church can be viciously attacked by the media or hoodlums just because of your uncompromising position on abortion or homosexuality.

See what Herod the king tried to do to the early church. He found harassing the church popular among the Jews. So, he killed James, the brother of John with the sword, and arrested Peter, hoping to kill him after the Passover [**Acts 12: 1-4**]. What was their offence? It was simply because they were followers of Jesus Christ.. In deed, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]. Herod happened to be the human agent used by Satan to carry out his prosecution of the righteous.

Some times, God may allow Satan to persecute the righteous as a training opportunity for higher responsibilities. For example, when we are getting too complacent, He can allow Satan to rock our steady boat to wake us up. For example, God allowed Satan to destroy Job’s family and estate and

inflict him with illness in order to test Job's faith [**Job 1: 6-21; 2: 1-10**]. The martyrdom of Stephen forced the early Christians to scatter abroad to spread the gospel to the Gentiles [**Acts 11: 19- 26**].

c) *As God's wrath*

Some times, God uses Satan to deal with believers who are derailing or backsliding so that they can return to the path of righteousness. For example, after Joshua, the successor of Moses, had led his troops to miraculously capture Jericho, he became swollen-headed and did not ask God how to attack a small place called Ai. Instead, he sent a spy team to check on the small city's defence. They came back to report that they needed a small army to take the city. So, Joshua attacked with about 3,000 men who were surprisingly driven back by Ai, killing thirty-six of Joshua's men, while the others lost courage [**Josh. 7: 1-6**]. Joshua tore his clothes and wept and prayed before God until evening. In answer, God told Joshua, "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived, and they have also put it among their stuff." It turned out that, contrary to God's command, one of them, Achan, had stolen valuable goods and money from Jericho. Israel was restored only after repentance and restitution [**vv. 7-26; Josh. 8: 1-29**].

4. Conclusion: Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Those who are already lost, those that God has given up as reprobate minds [**Rom. 1: 18-32**] have no trouble with Satan because they are already his! He is only warring against those who profess to be followers of Christ. Happily, Jesus has promised, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out" [**Jn 6: 37**]. As the Lamb of God, Jesus has by His death taken away the sin of the world [**Jn 1: 29**]. By His resurrection, He has taken back from Satan the keys of Hades and of Death [**Rev. 1: 18**]. Now, He sits in heaven as our Advocate with the Father [**1 Jn 2: 1**]. He has empowered us to overcome Satan by His blood and by the power of our testimony [**Rev. 12: 11**].

Satan may run to and fro in the earth looking for whom to devour but you have nothing to worry about *as long as you are in Christ*. You do not need to defend yourself in his court because whom the Lord has set free is free in deed. Alleluia!