

How Do I Look To God?

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Anne, for reading, and it'd be great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open at Zechariah chapter 3, page 951 of the Pew Bibles.

And as always, there's an outline, so inside the notice sheet, if you find that helpful, just on the third side there, there's an outline to show where we're going. I know that this morning a number of you are here as guests, which is great.

You've joined us in the third, in a series in this book of the Bible, Zechariah. It might seem a slightly obscure place to be in the Bible, but at St. Silas, we believe the whole of the Bible is God's Word to us and useful to us, so we're committed to teaching through the Bible, even the bits that perhaps we find more challenging, rather than just the bits that we are naturally fond of.

So Zechariah was a prophet, he was a messenger from God, and God gave him visions to give messages to God's people around 500 BC.

And even though it might feel like hard work to understand them, it's worth saying that this book, Zechariah, is the most quoted part of the entire Old Testament by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as they wrote about Jesus' death on the cross.

[1 : 17] So in that sense, Zechariah is really key for us if we're going to understand a bit more deeply who Jesus is and what he came to do. But to do that, we need God's help, so let's pray together.

Let's ask for God's help. Heavenly Father, thank you that you are a speaking God and that you gave messages to the prophets for us today. So please speak to us, we pray, through your prophetic word this morning.

And as you draw near to us, enable us in our hearts to draw near to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, God sent Zechariah to a discouraged people.

The original heroes were living in the land God had promised for his people. They'd been out of the land, they were back in. But the temple had been destroyed in a foreign invasion. And that's not like just losing your town hall or a stadium.

The temple was the place where God was present with his people. It was the symbol that God really was with them. And the temple has been destroyed. Now, God spoke to Zechariah to speak to the people to get them to rebuild the temple, which is what they did.

[2 : 30] They needed to get on with the task that God had given them. And in fact, when God raised up Zechariah, they'd stopped building. They just felt too low and too down and too oppressed. Now, how is that relevant for us today, 2016?

Well, anybody who trusts Jesus Christ today is one of God's people. And God has given his people today a great building job to do. We are to build the church. Not physically building buildings.

The church is the people. And God wants us to serve him wholeheartedly in this great building project that's going on in Glasgow and all around the world. If you decide to become a Christian, if you're not a Christian and you decide to turn back to God through Jesus, the temple grows.

Because the temple is where God lives. And the promise is God comes to live in you by his spirit.

So in that sense, the temple grows. If you're a Christian and you put God first in your life, perhaps you've been struggling with temptation and you say no and you live for God more committedly.

Perhaps if you have a gift and you start using that in serving God, in those ways you grow as a Christian, the temple is growing.

[3 : 54] The Bible says in the New Testament that in effect we're like living stones in the house of God and we're growing up so the temple is growing. And if over coffee time, after the service, you're talking to someone else at St. Silas and you speak God's word to them, you prayerfully encourage them with God's word from the Bible.

To encourage them, the temple grows because you're building them up if you prayerfully speak God's word. If you meet up with a friend and they're struggling and you speak God's word to them. In all these ways, we're building the temple today. But just like Zechariah's original audience, for us there are things that hold us back from getting on with the job God's given us today.

So let's dive into chapter 3. It's this vision that Zechariah had. In fact, Zechariah had eight visions all on the same night. Can you imagine that? Imagine the tossing and turning going on that night as Zechariah had eight visions.

And in this vision, the scene is a courtroom. If you just have a look back at verse 1. Then he, that's the angel, showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.

[5 : 18] So God is in the judgment seat. Satan is the prosecuting lawyer. And in the dock is the high priest. At the time, that was Joshua the high priest.

He represents the people. So as we read in here, in a sense, he represents us. The priest was there to stand between God and the people. And this scene introduces us to our first point.

It's the terrifying problem. The problem is our guilt before God. It's described here in two very challenging and vivid pictures. The first is a burning stick.

You see that in verse 2? Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire? I'm reading a book at the moment called Lamentation by C.J. Sansom.

I don't know if you've read this book. But it's set at the time of the Reformation. It's a novel set in the 16th century. And it starts with the main character, Matthew Shardlake. He's a lawyer and he has to represent the inns of court at a burning that we know took place historically.

[6 : 21] It's historical fiction. You can go to Smithfield Market today in London and see the memorials to where people were burnt. As people had copies of the Bible in English for the first time, which was illegal.

And people were reading. They were understanding that you were made right with God by faith alone in Jesus. They were denying that the bread and wine was changing during the Lord's Supper into something else.

And they were being burnt to death for that. And as you read about Shardlake being at this burning, it is really horrific. He can't bear to watch, but he has to be there to represent the inns of court.

I know this is extraordinary, but that horrible way to die is one of the pictures that the Bible uses of the terrible situation we are in because of our guilt before God.

It's just a picture, but it is a picture of serious danger. And do you see the urgency as well in the image? The stick is burning and it has to be snatched from the fire to be brought to a safe place.

[7 : 32] The God who made us and who loves us warns us with images like this so that we'll take action. He doesn't want us to perish. He wants us to come away from the fire.

The second picture is in verse 3. If you have a look at verse 3. Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.

Again, it's still picture language, but it is equally shocking here. It describes the man who was meant to stand between a perfect, righteous, loving God who has never done anything wrong and flawed humanity in all our brokenness.

The high priest should have been wearing a breastplate and on the breastplate it had these 12 stones to represent the 12 tribes of his people and he would be praying for them before God.

It symbolizes that we need a priest to be our mediator between God and ourselves. But here we see the high priest inside out, if you like. Instead of seeing the garments he's got on, we see what his heart is like.

[8 : 38] Because of his own rebellion against God and because of his people's rebellion against God, he's completely inadequate to be the mediator. He's turned up to court in filthy rags in the picture.

Imagine it. Absurd picture. And so these opening verses are to confront us with the problem of our guilt. I don't know whether you are somebody who feels guilty about anything.

One of the ways that we try and deal with guilt today in our culture is sometimes by saying the whole concept of guilt is unhealthy. That there shouldn't really be rules that you'd feel guilty if you break.

But of course none of us lives consistently like that. We all have a moral code. We all live as though there are right ways to live and wrong ways to live. And we have our standards that we judge

ourselves by and that we judge other people by.

I mean just think, if somebody does something horribly wrong to you, you would hope that they would feel guilty about it. So we still have this problem of what to do with human guilt.

[9 : 46] We know that it's not good to feel guilty, but we wrestle with how to deal with that. We see it in our culture today. So the book and the novel, sorry, that's the same thing, a book and a novel.

But the novel and the movie, *The Kite Runner*, was about two boys who lived in Afghanistan and grew up together. There's Amiya, who lived in a nice house with his father Baba. And they have these two servants, the father Ali and the son Hassan.

And the boys, Hassan and Amiya, are friends. And Hassan is lovely to the boy that he's there to serve and look after. And then Baba does something horrific.

He sees Hassan being, sorry, it's Amiya. Amiya sees Hassan being attacked by some other boys. It's a race-related attack. And because he's worried about the impact on him if he steps in to help his friend, he pretends he never saw it.

And then he is racked with guilt for having not said anything. What does he do? So he decides the only thing he can do is get his servant out of his life.

[10 : 59] So he hides some money and a watch under Hassan's pillow. And he tells his father that Hassan has stolen them. So that his father sends away the boy and his dad.

Years later, at the time the film's set, Amiya lives in California. But he says those events have defined his whole life. They've made him who he is. And he has to go back to Afghanistan and try and deal with what he's done wrong.

It leaves us asking, what will you do with your guilt? In the movie and the book *Atonement* by Ian McEwen, he explores a similar kind of nightmare scenario. Many of you will be familiar with it.

Briony Tallis is a 13-year-old girl and she writes a lot. And her older sister is falling in love with this young man, Robbie. And Cecilia and Robbie are in love. But Briony misinterprets what's happening as a 12-year-old girl.

And she thinks that Robbie has evil intent. And so she lies about him. And she tells her family that she's seen him commit rape. And he ends up in prison.

[12 : 04] And he ends up sent off to war. The whole book and the whole movie are about trying to resolve what she has done that's so horribly wrong. And you get to the end of the book and you realize she's the character who's written the book.

And she can't deal with it. The question Ian McEwen is asking is, can there ever be atonement?

And he leaves you thinking, there can't be. Between the two who have been separated. But also as Briony asks forgiveness for what she's done.

And he's denied it. And the Bible warns us here that those feelings of guilt, in a sense, are very real. We are guilty before God.

We're used to courtroom scenes, aren't we? We see them on the TV all the time. There was a few good men and Erin Brockovich. And many of you probably watch *Suits* today. I used to be a lawyer. And I worked on a case where we had a witness, Brian Quinn, who was chairman of Celtic Football Club at the time.

And he was being called into the witness box. It was civil offense, not criminal. And he was acquitted. But he was cross-examined for 46 days in the witness box.

[13 : 13] As they went through every day of his time, when this issue had gone wrong, scrutinizing every decision that he'd taken. It was agonizing for him, all the time being accused by a barrister of wrongdoing.

And this courtroom drama is a reality that we will all face one day. God sees everything that we do and we say and we think. And his standards of what's right and wrong are perfect.

They're much higher than ours. The root of our problem isn't that we do some bad things sometimes. It's that fundamentally, we were made to build our lives on God.

And we build them on other things instead. Good things that he's given us that we use to replace him in our hearts. And the Bible is clear that as well as there being an all-good, all-powerful person, spiritual person, God, there is an evil spiritual person.

And his name in the Bible is Satan, which means accuser. For what Satan wants is to see humanity, whom God loves, separated from God forever.

[14 : 21] And to achieve that, he simply appeals to God's justice. You can't accept this person. Look at what they've done. Look at how they treated you and other people.

So we look as though we're in filthy rags in the courtroom. That's the terrifying problem. And I guess the question is, will I accept that this is how God looks at me?

That I'm not the person I know I ought to be? Because then comes the transforming promise. There's tension in the courtroom.

And then what happens next is breathtaking. Have a look at 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. All the wrongdoing, all the guilt, everything he's ever done wrong is taken away.

[15:25] God doesn't see it anymore in the courtroom. It's removed. And it goes further than that. Look with me at the end of verse 4. See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.

Then I said, this is Zechariah, put a clean turban on his head. That's what the high priest wore. So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him. God gives to Joshua resplendent clothes. And that's because when we come to God in Christ, he doesn't just treat us as criminals who've got away with it, who are pardoned. No, he treats us as though we've been completely righteous. The Christian promise is that when we die, it's as though we can go to the gates of heaven with a certificate that says, this man, this woman, led a perfect life. And the certificate is just a free gift signed by Jesus Christ.

So friends, this is a real promise on offer to every one of us. The slate completely wiped clean. In theological language, if you want some jargon, which you probably don't, but it helps me, we talk about alien righteousness.

[16:37] Alien in that it's not from within ourselves. It was alien to us. That's why it's so frustrating that people who are not Christians see Christians as self-righteous, that sometimes churchgoers come across as holier than thou, as though we're looking down on other people, as though we're judgmental.

If you're here as a guest, and you've been given that impression of Christianity this morning, then I apologize to you. Please let me apologize because you've been completely misled about the Christian faith.

See, at the heart of the Christian faith is alien righteousness. As a Christian, I believe there is nothing in me that makes me worthy of a right standing before God, approval by God.

But a righteousness has been handed to me as an entirely free gift. A new wardrobe, my filthy rags taken off, resplendent clothes put upon me.

And if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, you could accept that gift today. You could do that. You could ask God for that. And if you are a Christian, then the challenge is, we need to fight the daily battle to enjoy this privilege.

[17:49] Every day we face this battle. Will I listen to Satan's accusations about me? And start to think that God won't accept me because of my mistakes?

Or will I listen instead to God's promises? I don't know about you, but I often feel that I've let God down. It happens to me every day. I'll be aware as I go through life that I've given in to temptation. Sometimes even in an area of my life that I've really been battling about. And I give in. I lose my self-control. I get angry. Speak unkindly about somebody. All kinds of things.

I do something selfish. I feel terrible. What happens next is sometimes I think, I can't pray. There's no point praying. I won't bother reading my Bible.

It's almost as though I think, until I've made up for it by doing some good stuff today, I can't really go near God. I can't talk to God. Which is a crazy way to think.

[18:51] And if that's how you ever feel, if that's how perhaps even you feel this morning, you need to speak God's promises to yourself and claim them for yourself.

That if you're a Christian, God has clothed you with a righteousness that's nothing to do with your own behavior. You stand forgiven. And knowing that liberates us to serve God wholeheartedly and without fear.

That's what happens to Joshua in verse 7. I don't know if you noticed that. But having received the gift of forgiveness, verse 7, this is what the Lord Almighty says, if you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts.

You see what he's saying? Joshua can get on now with the task God has given him because he knows his sin has been taken away. He stands in grace to serve God. And that's true of any of us

today who puts their trust in Jesus.

And it should encourage us that we can give our whole lives for God in that freedom. We'll all choose something to live for. If you decide not to live for God, you will live for something else that you love and trust and serve.

[20 : 05] And God is the best master you could ever choose. But when you try to honor him, he works through you. And when you mess up, he's already dealt with the mess.

So he can pick you up and you can serve him again. So at St. Silas, we should spend our time confessing our sins to God.

And it's right as a Christian to spend time reflecting deeply on the ways that we let God down. That's right. But then we must let it sink in that every single thing we've done wrong has been taken far away from us.

God looks on us in his courtroom and he is delighted with us and how we've lived in what he sees. Do you notice there was a command in verse 4?

The command in verse 4 is see. See what I have done. See I have taken away your sin.

[21 : 09] Look at that. Look at the promise. Look at the promise. But back in the courtroom, where is the due process in that?

What would you say if you were Satan the accuser, the prosecuting barrister? Where's the justice in this verdict? How can God be just and yet count people like me and you and Joshua as right, as though we've lived perfectly?

So after the terrifying problem and the transforming promise, God reveals the terrific plan. It's clearly looking ahead from 520 BC. Did you notice that in verse 8? It's important, verse 8, that he says this.

Listen, O high priest Joshua, and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come. See that? Joshua was the high priest at the time, but the Lord is promising he's just a symbol of what's coming.

Somebody is coming. A true and better priest is coming. We read on, and God says this. I'm going to bring my servant, the branch.

[22 : 22] Well, that is a sort of a wow moment in the Bible, because if you've read the Bible to this point, we know who the branch is. We've already heard about him. It's another word for the Messiah, for God's promised rescuing king.

And two centuries before Zechariah's time, there were two other prophets sent from God who started calling the Messiah the branch. One of them was Isaiah, and in chapter 11, he talked about the branch coming.

He said he would be the spirit-filled, righteous judge who would come and bring peace to the world. Another prophet, Jeremiah, around the same time, said in chapter 23, the branch is the righteous king who comes to save God's people.

Here, the Lord is promising Zechariah that this branch is the ultimate high priest that we need. In verse 9, the picture of him changes from a branch to a stone.

It's another picture, this time emphasizing by a stone that God's promises here are fixed and permanent. You can depend on them. And then suddenly, this branch is the means by which God's people can be forgiven.

[23 : 39] If you have a look at verse 9, 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, and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.

Sorry. So what he's saying is, if you were somebody in 500 BC and you heard that promise, you know that God is going to send somebody into the world, and somehow, in a single day, they will take away all the sin of God's people so that they can stand before God with their guilt taken away. And then on Good Friday, the branch, Jesus Christ, dies on the cross, and the curtain in the temple is torn in two to show that all our sin has been dealt with in one go.

The penalty has been paid for the sins of all God's people as he dies on the cross. Isn't that amazing that he's promised here in a single day?

The great hymn writer William Cooper put it like this, there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunge beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.

[24 : 54] The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, and there have I, though vile as he, washed all my sins away. And the result for God's people is utter contentment, a picture of the

soul rest that's on offer to us when we put our trust in Jesus.

All the guilt is gone, and a picture of the certain hope that we have to look forward to of a future in heaven. You see that in verse 10. In that day, verse 10, in that day, each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree.

Well, these were people who lived on tough land where it was hard to get crops, who'd been taken into exile and had their crops taken from them. They knew about hardship.

And God says, picture the day when your vine is bursting with grapes, when your fig tree is full of fruit, and you're so secure in God's provision that you can invite your friends over to sit under your vine and fig tree and enjoy peace in the shade of your crops.

You see, it's a promise to them of heaven on earth. And today, we are surrounded by people who are searching for contentment in life.

[26 : 10] People who are unsettled, who are always looking for the next thing that might give them contentment. And God promises us that we can go to the cross and see that our filthy rags of our most guilt-ridden moments are taken off us and we're given garments of honour to serve God with.

At the cross, we see Jesus, the one who made us, suffering for our sin because he had to be our high priest so that one day, if you trust him, he will invite you to come into his world put right and sit with your neighbour under your vine and fig tree in peace.

He is the branch whom God on the cross allowed to burn in the fire so that we could be plucked away and rescued to live for him.

So if you're here and you're already a Christian, let me ask you, are you held back from serving God wholeheartedly because you feel guilty? You feel unworthy.

Perhaps if you're caught up in a besetting sin, a habitual sin, and you feel you're not making progress, so it makes you feel unworthy to step out and serve God. There's an American pastor and writer called John Piper and he identifies this as a real problem in America today and I take it that it's in Scotland as well, in our failure to send out more people around the world to tell others about Jesus in the nations that haven't heard.

[27 : 41] John Piper writes this, one of the major forces preventing young people from obeying the call of God into vocational Christian service is defeat in the area of lust.

Now it might not be lust that you feel guilty about, it might be something else, but that mindset is very real today, a mindset that thinks I can't witness to my friends about Jesus Christ because I'm such a spiritual failure myself.

I'm not worthy to be a servant of God because I've been, I've got drunk too many times, I've got angry too many times, I've looked at pornography too many times.

Well if that's how we feel but we are trusting Jesus and him alone today, God says to you, remember the gospel that none of us is qualified to serve God.

God doesn't use worthy people, he uses broken people who admit their brokenness and who live by the cross and cling to it as their promise of forgiveness.

[28 : 46] The writer Tim Chester says this, Noah was a drunkard, Jacob was a cheat, Moses was a murderer, Gideon was a coward, David was an adulterer, Jeremiah was a depressive, Matthew was a traitor, James and John were hotheads, Simon the zealot was a terrorist, Peter was all talk, Paul was a persecutor of God's people.

Every act of deliverance that Samson undertook started with his uncontrolled lust and yet there he is among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. See God assures his people in Zechariah 3, you can get on with the task that I've given you because in my eyes you are clothed with a righteousness that you never achieved because of my branch that is coming to take away your sin.

So do you feel guilty this morning? Well remember your courtroom drama because we've got a job to do. God wants us to devote ourselves with all that we have to serving him today, to get on with building his church, committing to him and to each other, using our money, using our gifts, using our time to build his church and we can do that because God has dealt with our sin and he sends us out to joyfully, freely, serve him.

Let's pray together. O God, our righteous judge, we praise you for the hope that one day justice will be done in our world as humanity stands in your courtroom.

And Father, though the warnings of your word about the condemnation we face without you are very hard for us to accept, we thank you that you speak truth to us.

[30 : 44] that we might take action. And we thank you for your extraordinary promise to Joshua in the courtroom.

See, I have taken away your sin. Thank you that that promise gives us an unspeakable comfort of sins forgiven, of conscience cleansed.

And we praise you that that promise is yes because of our great high priest, the branch, the Lord Jesus Christ. That through him on Calvary you removed all the sin from us in a single day.

And so we pray that you would write this promise by your spirit on our hearts in order that we trust you and live for you. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.