

Priest And King

by Steve Zeisler

The apostle Peter uses a wonderful phrase to describe the church of Jesus Christ. We are a "royal priesthood," he says. (1 Peter 2:9) In those words there are two great concepts wedded together: we are royalty, kings and queens who are called by God to establish righteousness on earth, and we are priests, called to minister to the spirit of human beings; we partake in the glorious work of helping people see that God loves them, that he has forgiven them, that he is committed to them; as priests we usher others into the Holy Place, into the presence of God himself. Let us consider this morning royalty and priesthood, kings and priests.

In chapter 6 of Zechariah, the book we are studying in this series, the Lord Jesus ("a man whose name is Branch" 6:12) is identified as the one who unites those two concepts, royalty and priesthood, in Israel's history. Because Jesus is our Lord, he gives Christians that responsibility in our day to unite those concerns. Today we will discover some helpful insights on how to carry out this responsibility by studying two visions in the book of Zechariah. First, in chapter 3, Zechariah was given a vision concerning Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, who was high priest; and secondly, in chapter 4, Zechariah was given a vision for the sake of Zerubbabel, who was the political ruler (a royal descendant of David) in Israel at that time.

At our pastoral staff meeting last week we spent an entire morning discussing two issues of crucial importance for our church family. First, we talked about the terrible cost in human suffering brought about by self-hatred and guilt. We prayed for the families in this church who have been split apart because of guilt; and we prayed for guidance as pastors on how we can minister to and pray for these families. Secondly, we discussed at length the plight of the homeless on the Peninsula, and what God would have us do about this problem. It has been widely reported in the media that there are growing numbers of hungry, homeless people in this area who, despite their best efforts, cannot provide for themselves. You will recognize that those are properly the concerns of priests and kings; priests who are called to minister to the hearts of people suffering guilt and alienation; and kings who are called to establish the righteous rule of God on earth, who are to seek to alleviate suffering, to bring about justice. Those are the topics we are going to look at in these apocalyptic visions of the prophet Zechariah, and his interpretation of them.

Zechariah 3: 1-5:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. And he spoke and said to those who were standing before him saying, "Remove the filthy garments from him." Again he said to him, "See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes." Then I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the Lord was standing by.

Here is a courtroom drama better than any Perry Mason episode you have ever seen! The issues at stake in this enactment are the most crucial imaginable; they are the issues of eternal life, cleanness of spirit and soul, and a right relationship with God. Joshua, the high priest, has two problems. The first is guilt; he is guilty. His filthy and tattered clothing represents the iniquity that clings to him, the rebellion, the wickedness that clings to him. His second problem is that he has an accuser. The penetrating, violent, piercing voice of the accuser batters and belittles him. The pointing finger of his Satanic adversary stabs him and crushes him.

We too have the same problems. Any objective biblical analysis declares with certainty that we have rebelled against God; we have loved ourselves more than others, and it is entirely our fault for so doing. We are genuinely guilty. And we too are the victims of the adversary, the accuser, the one who knows how to pierce

any armor that would offer us a shred of hope. He knows how to darken our sense of self-- worth, how to hurt and destroy us.

It is interesting to remind ourselves that in considering these issues we are discussing the words of a sixth century B.C. Hebrew prophet who had apocalyptic visions. I suggest that this man is talking about our human experience more realistically, more profoundly, more certainly than any of our modern commentators, however. Many people say that the Bible is an ancient and obscure book which deals in an ancient and obscure fashion with the religious rites of the Jewish people. But here in these visions Zechariah is dealing much more to the point of our need and of our current struggles than any contemporary commentator.

Recognize that most psychologists don't even attempt to deal with the problem of guilt. They can't. No one can absolve another for his high-handed arrogance toward God. No one can strip from us the iniquitous clothing that clings to us. At best, a psychologist can help us with our feelings of guilt by merely helping us rearrange our memories a little, but he cannot deal with the subject of real guilt. Our law courts today are increasingly disappointing to many because for all intents and purposes they have stopped asking questions about what is true or false. Decisions are rendered not on the facts, not on the question of guilt or innocence, but on procedural effectiveness, how dynamic your lawyer is, etc. Spokesmen in this day are not asking the kinds of questions or dealing with the subjects that the Bible wades right into and speaks forthrightly about.

Joshua's twin problems, real guilt and Satanic accusation, remain our problems today. Unless our Lord answers these problems for us there are no answers to them. It is the Word of God and the actions of our God which take away iniquity and accusation. We are not strong enough in ourselves to deal with these things.

The woman who was caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) and brought before Jesus was viciously accused by a ring of self-- righteous finger-pointers. She was torn from the bedroom-- caught in the very act-- the Scripture says. If she was clothed at all she must have been clothed somewhat like Joshua was in this vision, in some shred of clothing, grabbed at the last moment. Disheveled certainly guilty she stood in public before the Lord himself. The servants of Satan ringed her, accusing pointing their fingers, deriding and belittling her, spewing out incontrovertible facts about her. The crowd wanted to stone her and urged Jesus to lead in the judgment of this woman. But his word, his actions his strength and his power saved her. He was the one who silenced the voices of accusation. No one else could have done so. His understanding of human nature and his authority from God stopped all of her accusers and sent them away in subdued self-- examination. The word of Jesus Christ had clothed her in clean garments as well: Neither do I condemn you he said. Because he had the authority to forgive her she was forgiven utterly for what she had done.

In 1 Corinthians Paul describes the Christian church this way

Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homo-- sexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9- 11)

That same cleansing word of God that takes away the guilt that deservedly clings to us removes our filthy garments and makes us whole and beautiful again. That same word stops the voice of accusation; it is the only power that can finally turn off the drumbeat in our minds that fosters self-hatred.

Joshua the high priest himself underwent the treatment of this cleansing and rebuke of the accuser, so that he could carry out his priestly role for his people. He too could sing with David Deliver me from my blood guiltiness O God Thou God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness. O Lord open my lips that my mouth may declare Thy praise. (Psalm 51:14-15)

Chapter 3 goes on to talk about the explosive implications of this dramatic cleansing of the high priest. The chapter ranges forward into history to talk about the Branch who was to come. We are told of the time of peace ahead when neighbors would fellowship in fruitful gardens and of a mysterious stone, identified in the next vision as the topmost stone of the rebuilt temple.

Chapter 4 describes the second vision which concerns the ministry of Zerubbabel, the king. While priests have the responsibility to preach about and bring about reconciliation between God and man, kings are responsible to extend the rule of God on earth, to lead in the expression of God's rule, establishing righteousness, winning conversions alleviating suffering and overcoming evil. Chapter 4: 1-3:

Then the angel who was speaking with me returned, and roused me as a man who is awakened from his sleep. And he said to me. "What do you see?" And I said, "I see, and behold, a lamp stand all of gold with its bowl on the top of it, and its seven lamps on it with seven spouts belonging to each of the lamps which are on the top of it; also two olive trees by it, one on the right side of the bowl and the other on its left side."

Verses 11-14:

Then I answered and said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right of the lamp stand and on its left?" And I answered the second time and said to him, "What are the two olive branches which are beside the two golden pipes, which empty the golden oil from themselves?" So he answered me saying, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord." Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones, who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth."

Zechariah saw a vertical stand with a large golden bowl on top of it. Beside the bowl were two olive trees, and branches from these trees reached over the bowl so that olive oil dripped continually into the bowl, keeping it filled at all times. Arranged around this bowl were seven reservoirs somewhat like a gravy boat, perhaps; each of these reservoirs had seven spouts around its rim and all were being fed by the bowl. These spouts had lighting wicks in them. So Zechariah saw a beautiful lamp stand that had at least forty-- nine flames; and the lamp never went out because oil was perpetually supplied by the trees that grew beside it.

I'm sure I cannot tell you what is the import of all these details. One thing I can say however, is that the number seven is used throughout Scripture as a way of saying that something is complete or sufficient. As we see the figure seven mentioned all through this description, what we are being told here is that the light this spiritual incandescence is complete, sufficient; it never goes out it is always effective.

The oil was what supplied the light, and oil in Scripture when used as a symbol is almost always a figure for the Holy Spirit for the work of the Spirit of God. Zechariah saw a perpetually lighted lamp, always sufficient. In the prophet's time the vehicle, the carrier of spiritual light the lamp structure itself, was the nation Israel. God expressed himself in Old Testament times through the nation Israel. Today, the vehicle for that expression is his church, the body of Christ. As we are filled with the Spirit of God through us that light is expressed to the world around us.

Let me go on and read an explanation by the angel of some of the effects of this vision. Verse 4:

Then I answered and said to the angel who was speaking with me saying, "What are these, my lord?" So the angel who was speaking with me answered and said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord."

Then he answered and said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. 'What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!" ' Also the word of the Lord came to me saying, "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? But these seven will be glad when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel- these are the eyes of the Lord which range to and fro throughout the earth. "

Zerubbabel is told that the majestic burning lamp in the vision was primarily for his sake. It was designed to teach him about his work as king and ruler of his people. The project they were working on at that moment

was the rebuilding of the temple. Zerubbabel is promised that despite a mountain of difficulties that lay before him there would come a day when he would be able to place the capstone, the finishing piece of this temple rebuilding project. The eyes of God were on that project; the sevenfold gaze, the complete concern of God was focused on it.

I would like to call your attention to two phrases in verses 4 through 10. The first is in verse 6, where we are told that the enterprise of establishing the rule of God on earth, the work of kings, would be accomplished " 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts. " " Might and power" here are descriptions of human effort. As such, they are in direct contrast to the work of the Spirit of God.

Christians in every age have been tempted, and often succumb, to the idea that hard work, sleepless nights, sweaty brows, massive organizations, deep concern on our part will accomplish the work of God, move forward the establishment of justice, the alleviating of suffering, and the winning of conversions. We are tempted to believe that armies, money, marches, conglomerates, lobbies and computerized mailing lists are a source of confidence for us in seeing God's work go forward. Last week we were treated to news reports of the shameful demagoguery of Oral Roberts, who had the temerity to suggest that if all his friends would send him \$240 he and his hospital in Tulsa would find the cure for cancer. But it is not by might, or by power, or shady money-raising schemes that God's work gets done.

It is distressing to me to see how frequently Christians express their concern about important issues like nuclear weapons, abortion, or civil rights, in what is essentially a frantic and desperate fashion, as if God can do nothing apart from their personal presence on the job. They rush about the country in a lather of fear, not believing that God can do anything except when their hand is present to turn the crank. God is much more likely to use thousands of ordinary, obedient Christians who carry out the responsibilities he gives them to bring about the great turning of this ship of human history than he is people who think that raising a million dollars and having a press conference is the only effective way to get things done.

Zerubbabel was told that the work he was to do was important. We know from the Bible record that that temple later became the center of the most important events in the history of our race: Messiah worshipped in that temple. Mankind was saved by events that occurred in the city where Zerubbabel lived. This king was an apparently insignificant man in his day, yet he was a man on whom the gaze of God rested; and the Spirit of God would take his efforts and make something magnificent of them.

The second phrase is in verse 10. It is the question, "Who has despised the day of small things?" In making an effective king out of Zerubbabel, the question of despising low profile and small effort is raised. Americans more than any other people love bigness, high profile, high energy expression. We grow restive if we do not see big results quickly. We are not unlike Elijah, who, after doing battle with the prophets of Baal found himself running for his life. Depressed and exasperated, he announced that he was the only one left who cared, the only one who could be counted on, the only man of faith left. The loving rebuke of the Lord was, "That's not true. There are seven thousand left, Elijah, who have not bowed the knee to Baal. You just don't see them; that's your problem. Seven thousand of my servants are sown throughout the nation in villages, in towns and on farms. They have shunned idolatry; they have stood their ground; they have made an impact for me. Just because they don't have a high profile you assume they're not there. You despise the small things I am doing." God told Elijah, in effect.

We have had reports given in this church in the last few months about teams who have gone into prisons in Colombia and found vital faith in those awful conditions. There are ministers for Christ's sake in those places, people who hold forth the light of God. Oh, you have to work hard to find it. You have to go through all kinds of channels to see this happening because nobody calls attention to it. Villages all over China which have not had any missionary impact for decades still have a vital and growing Christian testimony. The small things of God are at work everywhere to minister to the human condition.

Again, we need to recognize that what Zerubbabel was doing was not written very large on the canvas of human history of his day, yet the Lord said his attention was riveted there. The eyes of God were focused on this man with his plumb line; and God's heart was gladdened, we are told, by those events. "Do not despise the day of small things." In this church we have just begun a program of house fellowships. Most of these

began with six, eight or a dozen people. We have not talked about these much. We are not keeping close tabs on what is going on; there are no records entering a central computer. No one knows what will happen with the small house fellowships in Los Altos, Mountain View, Redwood City and Sunnyvale. But I hope none of us will despise these small things, and fail to appreciate that God is at work even in these low-profile gatherings.

Peter said of us that we are a "royal priesthood." We are both kings and priests. We have the same responsibility as Joshua had, to go before our Lord and be cleansed by him; to be honest about our weakness, and our failure, and thus receive from the hand of God the clean linen of honor. We need to let the Lord rebuke the accuser, the adversary, the Satanic killer who attempts to rob us of our rights before God. We are to be high priests who undergo that treatment and who then turn around and offer the same kind of help, to minister to a needy world, a darkened, hungry and desperate world cut off from its God.

Then we are also kings, royalty. As such we have the responsibility of undoing the effects of wickedness around us, for bringing justice where there is none, for alleviating suffering, for telling the truth. In order to be effective at that we have got to recognize that the light shed by God's Spirit cannot go out; the darkness will never overcome it. It exists and will continue to exist because the Spirit of God himself is limitless.

It is our responsibility to do what we are told, "Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit." That is how these things get done. And even if ours is a small thing, even if our work is unimpressive, do not despise it. There are millions of similar small things going on, none of which quite rise above the surface, but God himself is doing something magnificent as a result of them. The instructions given to this priest and this king are our instructions also. Let us be about the business that our Messiah was about, combining these two offices and moving forward in his service.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen
(Jude 25)

Catalog No. 3823
Zechariah 3:1-4:14
Fifth message
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January 23, 1983

[Back to Index Page](#)

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