

God & me, ACTUALLY

A Chinese farmer's horse ran away. The neighbors said, "How terrible." The farmer said, "Perhaps." The horse came back and brought a wild horse with it. The neighbors said, "How wonderful!" The farmer said, "Perhaps." The farmer's son was thrown from the back of the wild horse and broke his leg. The neighbors said, "How awful." The farmer said, "Perhaps." The army came conscripting all young men for war, but seeing the farmer's son's leg was broken, they did not recruit him. The neighbors said, "That's fantastic!" The farmer said, "Perhaps." The neighbors gave new meaning to previous events in light of more understanding.

Knowing the context shapes the meaning of what we read. It helps us understand the *why* behind the *what*. The Story Behind the Story of Zechariah 3:1-7 sets the stage for a personal encounter with God.

1. PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE—*Relinquish*

Slow down. Even stop. Preparing for spiritual reading requires a willingness to acknowledge and put down our concerns or distractions and be fully attentive to how God wants to meet us. Spiritual reading is about *encounter*—a sacred event, not a hobby. This takes time.

2. ABSORBING SCRIPTURE—*Read*

“What I mean to insist upon is that spiritual writing — Spirit-sourced writing — requires spiritual reading, a reading that honors words as holy, words as a basic means of forming an intricate web of relationships between God and the human, between all things visible and invisible. There is only one way of reading that is congruent with our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives and create truth and beauty and goodness, writing that requires a reader who, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, “does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood.”¹ This is the kind of reading named by our ancestors as *lectio divina*, often translated “spiritual reading,” reading that enters our souls as food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and becomes holiness and love and wisdom.²

¹ Rilke, Rainier Maria. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (New York: W.W. Norton), 201.

² Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 4.

Zechariah 3:1-7

Read the passage several times at different speeds. Slow down to feel the cadence and rhythm of the words alive in your mouth. Note any words or images that invite your attention or any questions you have about the passage. This scripture will be our 'home' for the next several weeks.

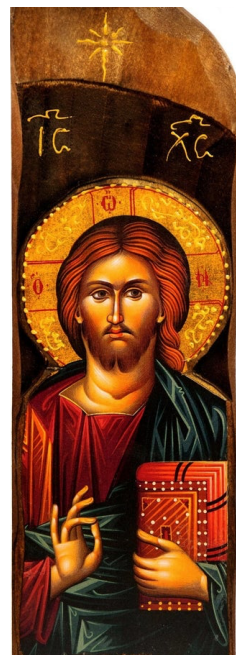
¹ Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. ² The LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"

³ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. 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 fine garments on you."

⁵ 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.

⁶ The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: ⁷ "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.'



3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?—*Think*

Let's explore The Story Behind the Story of Zechariah 3:1-7, which sets the stage for a meaningful encounter with God in scripture.

1. What is the backstory?

The Jewish people had been in the Promised Land for roughly 800 years, and for 490 years, they disobeyed God's command for Sabbath rest. Rather than participate in an act of obedience and trusting God's provision, God's people pursued a path of spiritual adultery involving idol worship, injustice, child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, and much more.

After sending several prophets to warn His people, God used the historical powers of the day to disperse His people across the Ancient Near East for 70 years of exile, with the promise that one day they would return to their land, rebuild their temple and follow God once again.

The book of Zechariah is set after the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, a 700-mile overland journey through a variety of challenging terrains. Zechariah was a boy accompanied by his grandfather, a priest, among the first group of Israelites allowed to return in 538 BC under the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia.

Zechariah became a prophet and a priest and worked alongside the prophet Haggai. He challenged and motivated the people to rebuild the temple and look for the fulfillment of God's promises despite the hardships and challenges the returning exiles faced.

2. Where is the focus of the action?

Jerusalem.

3. What is the time period?

Zechariah's dated visions and messages in chapters 1–8 all take place in the same general time period as Haggai's, beginning in October–November 520 BC with a call for the people of Judah to repent (Zechariah 1:1). He then received eight visions on the restless night of February 15, 519 BC (1:7), followed by four messages he preached on December 7, 518 BC (7:1). [Though his final messages in chapters 9–14 go undated, the mention of Greece in 9:13 suggests the prophecies came much later in his life, presumably sometime in the 480s BC, before Ezra (458 BC) and Nehemiah (444 BC) arrived to again revitalize the Jewish people.]

4. Who are the characters?

- **Zechariah**
See above. His name fittingly means, "God remembers."
- **Joshua the high priest (v. 1)**
Joshua was the high priest when the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity to Jerusalem (Ezra 3:8). He was the spiritual leader who served alongside the Israelites and encouraged them as they worked to rebuild the temple (Haggai 1:13–15).

(This Joshua is different from the Joshua who served as Moses' second-in-command and who led the Israelites into the Promised Land after Moses' death.)

His name also appears as *Jeshua*, and in Nehemiah 7:7 he is listed as one of the group who returned from Babylon.

- **Angel of the Lord (v. 1)**

In Zechariah 3, the "angel of the Lord" is a key figure who appears in a vision. This angel is often interpreted as a divine messenger who stands before Joshua the high priest and serves as an intermediary between God and His people. In the context of the vision, the angel of the Lord rebukes Satan, who is accusing Joshua, and reassures Joshua by declaring that he has been cleansed of his sins and is given a new, clean robe. With the power to act on God's behalf to rebuke Satan and to forgive and cleanse from sin, the Angel of the Lord is generally seen as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ.

- **Satan (v. 1)**

The word "satan" in Hebrew means "adversary" or "accuser." It is used here with the definite article to describe a character quality rather than a proper name— "the accuser." This word later came to represent a fallen angel opposed to God's purposes in this world. In this passage, Satan is depicted as an accuser standing at the right hand of Joshua, the high priest, seeking to accuse him before God.

- **The Lord (v. 2)**

YHWH, the proper name of the God of Israel.

5. Why this message to these people at this time?

Zechariah has a series of eight visions. The focus of our study, chapter 3:1-7, contains the fourth vision.

Zechariah emphasized a tone of encouragement to the struggling Israelites trying to rebuild the temple. Just six months before this vision, the people had rallied to begin again after quitting. Motivation was a key issue.

Characteristics of the audience:

- Historians estimate that the average lifespan was 25-30 years during the 6th century BC in this part of the world. Seventy years in exile meant that very few of those returning to rebuild the city and temple in Jerusalem had ever lived there before, and if so, they had been very young children when exiled to Babylon.
- The returnees are likely 2nd and even 3rd generation ex-pats, whose only association with Jerusalem was through their relatives.
- The Jews exiled to Babylon were integrated into the Babylonian culture in order to strengthen the economic, educational, and industrial fabric of their society. They established homes, schools, synagogues, and businesses, and in many cases, choose to remain there as the only home they had known.

- Following the exile to Babylon, the people left behind were those deemed unable to make a positive contribution (sick, handicapped, unskilled, elderly, etc.). This remnant was soon intermixed with Samaritans who sought to take advantage of the opportunity, along with migrating peoples, tribes, and invading groups of mercenaries. The exiled Jews returning from Babylon would have to compete with these people for resources, power, and position in a city left destroyed by an invading army several decades earlier.
- What might the returning Jews believe about the character of God? Their primary input would be the accounts from their families of punishment, utter destruction, and dislocation from all that they had known.
- One has to wonder about the degree of acceptance of responsibility—corporately and individually—expressed to the emerging generations for the systemic disobedience, depravity, idolatry, and perversion of their faith.
- Is God a punishing, capricious tyrant? Might that be how these returning Jews envision YHWH?
- And when arriving in Jerusalem, why would they be highly motivated to invest their lives to fulfill their grand or great-grandparents vision? To what degree was it *their* vision? *Their* conviction? What was their motivation, especially when they had to leave their schooling, positions, careers, businesses, and extended families in Babylon?
- Arriving at Jerusalem to find a city of rubble—city walls torn down and charred remains of a destroyed temple— lacking protection, resources and craftsmen, and resented by occupiers staking their claim, how motivated might they be to spend their lives rebuilding a temple in honor of a God who sanctions punishment, the destruction of a society, and death?
- And what might this audience think about themselves? How do they conceive of and experience their identity as children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren growing up in a culture of collective, unresolved guilt? Even though they did not participate in or contribute to the wrongdoing, how has the cultural collective sense of guilt and shame shaped their sense of self?

So, what is Zechariah’s message to these people at this time in history?

This passage captures YHWH’s attempt to communicate through His prophet Zechariah:

- 1) What God is really like
- 2) What we mean to Him
- 3) How to cultivate an authentic relationship with God

It’s a story about hope.

Zechariah 3:1-7 is reframing reality about who God is and what we mean to Him. That is, God and me, actually.

4. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?— *Pray*

Generally, what is your understanding and emotional reality of God while journeying through your own experience of failure, guilt, and shame?

How has your life development process (e.g., family relationships, challenges, people, events, circumstances, etc.) influenced your understanding and experience of God?

5. CHOOSING GOD'S INVITATIONS— *Respond*

At a personal level, what possible beliefs or feelings would have to change for you to fully embrace and be embraced by God's love?

How might your life be different if this were real for you?