

# God & me,

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## ACTUALLY

Our study brings us to one of the Bible’s most astonishing truths about God. Understanding the context allows the story to come alive, with a clear meaning and practical implications for 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives.

### The Accusation

The high priest, as the representative of God’s people, is on trial.

Following centuries of systemic disobedience, evil, and spiritual adultery—inspired, ironically, by the Adversary himself—God responds to the sin of Israel by dismantling their society and subjecting them to captivity and exile.

“Snatched from the fire” (v. 2) of exile, Joshua was appointed the high priest upon his return to Jerusalem. He was tasked with rebuilding the temple and restoring Israel’s religious practices. In his official role, Joshua represents the sins of the people.<sup>1</sup> The image of him covered in excrement symbolizes the utter blasphemy of God’s people “who had incurred the divine wrath, suffered the penalty of the exile, and now knew that they needed a way back to the presence of a holy God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some commentators maintain that Joshua was guilty of either 1) neglecting the building of the temple or 2) allowing his sons to marry foreign wives. The accusation about building the temple would have come too late since construction had resumed five months before (compare Haggai 1:15 with Zechariah 1:7.) The charge related to his sons would have been much too early since their intermarriage did not happen for another 50 years.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1972) 114.

The Accuser brings his case before the heavenly court, knowing God fully acknowledges the unresolved guilt of His people (hence exile). Satan's strategy assumes that a God of integrity and principle would comply with His own decrees—the Law. The Adversary's accusation implies a disqualification of God's people, for which there was no apparent legal remedy.

The Law's toolbox for forgiveness—the known remedies for sin—no longer exists.

The Accuser will argue that the Law has no remedy for the magnitude of this kind of sustained rebellion (four centuries). There is no longer any temple, no Hebrew religious practices (e.g., no religious implements, undefiled water, qualified animals, sanctified altars, etc.), and, most importantly, no holy high priest to mediate God's forgiveness.

The absolute blasphemy of God's people is His humiliation before the world. Certainly, He will not tolerate it.

Satan has a solid case.

So he stands in the heavenly court, seeking a final judgment. This is a historic opportunity for the Accuser to defeat God's plan, initiated at Creation, to establish a forever family. A guilty verdict here, and it's all over.

And, by all accounts, including God's, the only verdict available for the man shrouded in excrement is. . . *guilty as charged*.

God's wildest dreams and greatest hopes hang by a thread.

## Revisiting the Context

Let's revisit the context for just a moment. It tips us off to the intended message for all people of all time.

The context of Zechariah 3:1-7 is a largely NexGen population compelled by previous generations to uproot and redirect their lives. They leave behind the only country, culture, and careers they have known. The goal of their 700-mile journey is to rebuild a demolished religious building in an ungoverned wasteland without walls, structures, or resources.

For those returning to Jerusalem, their concept of God and how He regards them has been shaped primarily by those who have experienced God's punishment in the form of severe devastation and forced exile. You wonder what the returning generation has been taught?

The message or 'Big Idea' of Zechariah's prophetic dream—the reason it was critical for returning exiles and why it has shaped and sustained the faith of God's people for millennia—is the radical truth about who God *really* is and how He desires to relate to us.

## Looking for a Solution: The Old Testament Law

God's Law began as a way to teach tribes of rough-and-tumble nomads about the realities of a personal and loving deity. Understanding this is important. Over time, the Law evolved into a complex legal code governing civil and religious life, characterized by rules and regulations.

Now, in response to the Accuser in the heavenly courtroom, ancient listeners begin to consider possible pathways home to God—legal remedies for a people so incredibly defiled. What do the 'rules' provide for?

Their minds sort through the possible solutions like playing cards:

## **613 Commandments**

365 negative commands ('Do not')—one for each day of the year  
+ 248 positive commands ('Do')—one for each bone and major organ in  
the human body

613 commandments—the notion that every moment, every part of me is  
obedient to God

## **7 Feasts**

- Passover
- Feast of Unleavened Bread
- Feast of First Fruits
- Feast of Weeks
- Feast of Trumpets
- Feast of Tabernacles
- Feast of Dedication

## **6 Offerings**

- Burnt Offering
- Grain Offering
- Peace Offering
- Sin Offering
- Guilt Offering
- Thanksgiving

## **Multiple Purification rituals**

- Purification after Childbirth
- Purification from Skin Diseases
- Purification after Contact with a Corpse
- Purification of Objects
- Annual Day of Atonement

**The point:** Without sanctified religious persons, places, and objects, the Law remains helpless even to point us to God.

### **Illustration: Where to Get a Red Heifer?**

The elaborate rules and rigorous standards of Israel's purity laws stand in stark contrast to the holiest symbol of all, the high priest—the one mediator between God and man—standing utterly defiled and covered in excrement.

Anyone coming into contact with death or any other defilement was regarded as unclean. The Old Testament Law's provision for restoring ritual purity, allowing people to re-enter the presence of God or the temple, was through the ritual of the red heifer, explained in Numbers 19.

*A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin.<sup>3</sup>*

The rules were strict. A red heifer must be:

- Without defect, entirely red—including horns, hooves, and eyelashes— without any blemish or spot. Two or more white or black hairs disqualify it.
- At least three years old, having never been milked or pregnant.
- Without a single bent hair, indicating it has never been yoked or used for labor, symbolizing purity.
- Slaughtered and burned outside of the camp.
- Burned with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn, creating a ritual that produces ashes used for purification.

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 19:9. In Jewish history, only nine red heifers were slaughtered and burned in the period extending from the time of Moses to the destruction of the Second Temple.

Notice the extreme commitment to purity and how it contrasts with the high priest's current defilement, which represents the people's sin. Ritual purity stands in sharp contrast to complete filth.

If we fast-forward a few centuries, we encounter the first written collection of Jewish oral traditions,<sup>4</sup> which provides a detailed look at how their faith and practice evolved, including the ritual of the red heifer. Notice the passionate commitment to purity and how offensive it would be to have a high priest covered in excrement.

According to these writings, extreme care was taken to ensure that everyone and everything involved in the ceremony was ritually pure. No one could have had any contact with the dead or any form of ritual impurity.

Implements were made of stone, believed to be free of ritual impurities.

In Jerusalem, courtyards were built over virgin rock, where pregnant women had their children and raised them in isolation from the public for the specific purpose of ensuring that they never came into contact with a corpse or any form of ritual impurity. Only these children were used to draw and carry water for the ceremony of the red heifer.

At the appropriate time, oxen were brought with doors tied across their backs. The children sat atop the oxen with stone cups in their hands for the trip to the Pool of Siloam, filling the cups with water, then climbing back up and sitting on the doors for the return trip.

In Zechariah's historical situation, the Law has no remedy, no way back 'home' to the presence of a holy God. And a holy God could in no way bear the presence of a high priest and a people so wholly defiled.

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<sup>4</sup> The Mishnah (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE).

## The 'Rulebreaker'

*Then GOD said to the Accuser, "I, GOD, rebuke you, Accuser! I rebuke you and choose Jerusalem. Surprise!"<sup>5</sup>*

*Surprise!* is a good word here.

For some 1,500 years, from Abram to Exile, the Law educated God's people in the ways of forgiveness. But now, there is no provision for a way back to a holy God. The Accuser awaits the imminent collapse of the entire system of Old Testament Law and the end of God's dream to have a forever family.

And then, surprise. With one word, God breaks all of the rules.

### **"Chosen."**

Don't miss the implications here.

God is affirming that the rules don't ultimately save anyone. The Law was only meant to point to and guide us in our greatest joys.<sup>6</sup> Religion cannot resolve our brokenness or sin.

Only grace can.

Left helpless in our defilement and stuck with no way 'home,' God breaks every rule.

God chooses to relate to us according to love, not rules.

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<sup>5</sup> Zechariah 3:2 (Message Translation).

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:1-4; Galatians 3: 10-22.

For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;  
Since you are precious and honored in my sight,  
and because I love you,  
I would give the whole world for you.<sup>7</sup>

### **P.S. (A PostScript)**

We meet the image of the ‘Rulebreaker’ once again as the father of the Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-32), who runs to choose a son who wished him dead and celebrates his homecoming with everything he owns.

And we encounter the ‘Rulebreaker’ at a place called ‘Bald Head’ or ‘Skull,’ outside of Jerusalem, where Jesus dies on a cross to forgive our sins, creating a way home to the presence of a holy God.

That is what God is really like.

### **PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE—Relinquish**

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and renowned spiritual writer, believed that true listening is an act of love because it involves setting aside one's own agenda and being fully attentive to the other. He describes spiritual listening as a deep, heart-centered activity involving empathy and a willingness to be vulnerable.

*Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very being. We need to find the courage to create space in which God can act and speak. If we create space in which God can act and speak, something surprising will happen.*

—Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 43:3a;4



Be still and wait. Listen for the longings of your heart, and then follow them.

## **ABSORBING SCRIPTURE**—*Read*

### **Zechariah 3:1-7**

After mastering the text, work hard at allowing the text to master you. Be aware of how God wants to meet you here.

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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?”**

<sup>3</sup> Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. <sup>4</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: <sup>7</sup> “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.’”

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?—Think

Let's explore some key ideas here. Remember: Try free online resources like [BibleHub.com](https://BibleHub.com), [Biblegateway.com](https://Biblegateway.com), and [Blueletterbible.org](https://Blueletterbible.org). They help us master the text, so the text can master us.

### Key Observations:

- **The Lord rebuke you**

Hebrew, *gaar*, used twice for emphasis, means, “to sweep away.” That is, both the Accuser and his accusation are entirely and utterly reprovved, swept away. Not even a hint that his well thought out and presented arguments would even gain a hearing.

- **A burning stick snatched from the fire**

The reason for the strong rebuke is the phrase that follows: *Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?* Again, we must not take these words as referring to the high priest as an individual, but to the office that Joshua filled on behalf of God's people.

As we see in Amos 4:11, *a brand plucked from the fire* was evidently a proverbial saying indicating “privileged deliverance from God's providential chastisements.”<sup>8</sup> That is, Joshua's life and experience, representing God's people, is superintended—led—as a part of God's designs. God is involved here.

- **Chosen**

Hebrew, *bachar*, means “select, acceptable, appoint, choose.” It reflects God's sovereign authority to select people and places for His purposes. The choice signifies God's grace and restoration, that despite past failures and sin, God is willing to cleanse and redeem His people. It underscores the idea that God has a plan for His people and actively intervenes in their lives to fulfill that plan.

The grammatical form of *bachar* (a participle—“a word formed from a verb and used as an adjective or noun”) carries significant meaning. It indicates that YHWH has chosen Jerusalem and maintains His choice. Regarding God's original choice of the people of Israel, He affirms, “I still do!”

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<sup>8</sup> Baldwin 113.

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?— Pray**

Not, “What does it mean *to* you? but “What does it mean *for* you?”

How might your life be different if you lived as if God relates to you solely out of love, not Law?

What keeps you from believing and living like this?

## **CHOOSING GOD’S INVITATIONS— Respond**

This is about activating our will and aligning our thinking and feelings with what God is inviting us into.

If you fully embraced God as a ‘Rulebreaker,’ how might this alter your present understanding and experience of Him?

How might this affect how you think about yourself?

What might a pathway ‘home’ to God practically mean *for* you?

## TO PONDER

The right hemisphere of the brain is associated with several functions and characteristics distinct from the left side. While the two hemispheres work together, nurturing the right brain stimulates creativity, emotional understanding, and holistic thinking. That's what we're doing here.



***Woman Holding a Balance, Johannes Vermeer (c. 1664)***

*Woman Holding a Balance* depicts a woman who some scholars suggest may be pregnant and thus hints at a resemblance to the Virgin Mary. She stands serenely before a table with a jewelry box draped with strands of gold and pearls while she waits for her small handheld balance to rest. The work uses symbolism to tell a story of consequence through an ordinary scene. Held lightly between the woman's slim fingers, the delicate balance forms the central focus of this painting. The vanishing point of the painting occurs at the woman's fingertips. On the table before her are earthly treasures—i.e., the jewelry. Behind her hangs a portrait of the Last Judgment. On the wall opposite the woman's face is a mirror, a common symbol of vanity or worldliness, while a soft light raking across the picture sounds a spiritual note. The serene Madonna-like woman stands in the center, presumably weighing transitory worldly concerns against spiritual ones.

*How does God meet you while reflecting upon the symbols and meaning of this image?  
What inner motions are you aware of?*