

Counselor's Toolbox

More Than a Proof Text: “Your filthy clothes are gone.” (Zechariah 3)



by JANET NYGREN

Guilt is a bitter morsel we've all tasted. Whether it's the things we have done or things left undone, the burden of guilt stays with us. We taste, we swallow, we digest, then later we find the bitter morsel has become a part of us. So-called big sins like adultery, or everyday sins like speaking harsh words in a moment of anger, all have ripple effects that our regrets cannot undo. We beat ourselves up for making mistakes as parents, or failing to make good on promises to friends. We give in to desires that hurt ourselves and others, and we replay what we have done in our minds.

Such thoughts often find their way into a repetitive mantra that we're not even aware of unless we slow down to listen: *You're not good enough. If only you hadn't done that. What's wrong with you? You're such a failure.* The voice slowly erodes our confidence. It questions, accuses, wounds. If allowed to metastasize, it can paralyze us from fruitful interaction with others. Separation, withdrawal, and disengagement feel safer than continuing to make a mess of things, but ultimately leave us with hearts of stone instead of flesh.

The internal, condemning voice arising from guilt is a common narrative in counseling.¹ I find it helpful to bring it into the light—to make

1. For additional help on this topic, see Todd Stryd, “Self-Hatred and the Loving Voice of God,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 31:2 (2017): 8–20.

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what we are hardly aware of clear and explicit—and then counter it with a better, more life-giving voice. I often turn to Zechariah 3 for this, partly because it is an unfamiliar passage to most counselees, and partly because it is so rich in metaphor. It contrasts an accusing voice with a voice that rescues, equips, and invites us into useful service.

As background, Zechariah was a prophet during the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The exile was God’s means of punishing the people of Israel. For years they did not uphold God’s law, and it finally caught up to them. Powerful, neighboring nations destroyed and scattered them. Now, as the people return to Jerusalem, they remain “unclean” from being cast out. Their high priest, who represents the people to God and God to the people, is tainted as much as anyone else, and as such is unfit to approach God or administer God’s forgiveness through the sacrificial system. The people are faced with critical questions: *Do we still belong to God? After all that’s happened, can we be forgiven? Is he for us? Can we still live lives worthy of him? Is there hope for the future?* Consider the parallels to a counselee who feels guilty. The questions she faces due to her past are not so different.

Satan’s Accusing Voice

The book of Zechariah opens with a series of visions that are distinct pictures meant to encourage the people to keep going in the midst of disappointment, despondency, and guilt. Chapter 3 has a fourth such vision, addressing Joshua, the high priest at the time.² The stage is set in a courtroom-like scene, with the angel of the Lord in front of Joshua, and Satan standing beside Joshua, whispering accusations in his ear:

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. 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?” Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. (Zech 3:1–3)

2. Anthony R. Petterson, “Introduction to Zechariah,” in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 1634–35.

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