

XXIII. A Fountain for Cleansing

May 10, 2020 Zechariah 13:1-6

Theme: The blood of Jesus expiates our sins, removing our guilt, cleansing us from sin, and granting us forgiveness; His sacrifice also propitiates or turns away the wrath of God against our sins, reconciling us to Himself.

Aim: To experience the freedom from guilt, cleansing from sin, and unconditional forgiveness of God in our salvation.

Key Verses: ¹On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness (Zechariah 13:1).

Review

Last week, we looked at Zechariah 12:10-14. Verse 10 is the key verse, and is composed of three important verbs that correspond to three steps in the *ordo salutis*, the “order of salvation.” The first verb is *pour*. God promised to *pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy*. This promise is nothing less than the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was poured out first on the apostles and then on 3000 converts on the day of Pentecost, and is continually being poured out upon the elect of all ages as they come to faith in Christ. In terms of the *ordo salutis*, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit results in regeneration, whereby the grace of God quickens our hearts and enables our conversion through faith and repentance.

The second significant verb in Zechariah 12:10 is *look*. The outpoured Spirit enables the elect to *look on me, on him whom they have pierced*. In this phrase we have a hint of the Trinity, as God the Father pours out upon us God the Spirit, which enables us to look with faith upon God the Son, Jesus Christ, who was “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” (Is. 53:5). The apostle John declares this prophecy was fulfilled when the Roman soldier pierced the side of the crucified Savior after His death (Jn. 19:37). Looking upon Jesus is an act of faith, a saving grace that follows regeneration in the *ordo salutis*.

The final verb in verse 10 is *mourn*. Those who have the Spirit poured out on them in regeneration and look with faith upon the sufferings of our Lord *shall mourn for him*. Mourning is a sign of repentance, godly grief and hatred of our sin, which caused our Savior to suffer and die in our place. Repentance unto life is the next step in the *ordo salutis*, and is not to be confused with worldly remorse, a regret of sin’s consequences only, which invariably leads to death (2 Cor. 7:10). In summary, *God pours out His Spirit of grace and faith on the elect to produce godly sorrow and sincere repentance leading to salvation without regret*.

Introduction

Last week, we looked in 12:10-14 at regeneration, faith, and repentance which are in the heart of the *ordo salutis*. Previously, in our study of 9:11-17, we discussed several steps in the latter stage of the salvation sequence: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Understanding the technical or theological meaning of these terms is a study in *forensic salvation*, the legal aspects of how God saves us. In today’s passage, although we come again upon the concepts of

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justification and sanctification, the text lends itself more to a discussion of experimental or *experiential salvation*, that is, what we experience as we are being saved.

In Zechariah 12:10, we saw the experience of guilt for sin, leading to mourning and repentance. However, if that guilt is not removed, what then? For salvation to progress, for the sinner to experience the full spectrum of salvation, he or she needs to have their guilt removed, their sin atoned for, and their conscience cleansed. That is the subject today's passage, and particularly 13:1.

The term *atonement* is often used to describe the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of His people. At its core, atonement has to do with reconciliation; in this case, reconciling human beings who are alienated from a holy God because of their sin. In discussing how the atonement of Jesus Christ is accomplished, theologians often talk about two similar terms: *expiation* and *propitiation*. These terms are so closely related that one Greek word in the New Testament, *hilastērion*, and its related cognates *hilasmos/hilasmon*, are translated by some Bible versions (e.g., RSV) as “expiation” and others (e.g., ESV, NASB) by “propitiation.” The NIV tries to avoid this controversy altogether by using terms like “sacrifice of atonement” or “atoning sacrifice” instead. However, despite their closeness, these two terms have somewhat different meanings.

Expiation contains the prefix *ex-*, which means “out of” or “away from.” It refers to the removal from or taking away from someone the guilt and defilement of sin. This is accomplished by paying the required price for sin, which is death. At the cross, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ satisfied sin's penalty on our behalf. Thus, we can say that the atonement *expiates* our sins, resulting in our forgiveness, cleaning, and pardon. This is exactly what the guilty sinner needs: to experience the freedom from guilt, cleansing from sin, and unconditional forgiveness of God in our salvation.

However, more than just expiation occurs in the atonement at the cross. While expiation deals with man's biggest problem with sin—our guilt and defilement—*propitiation* deals with God's attitude toward our sin: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Unless God's righteous wrath against sin can be satisfied or removed, reconciliation between a righteous God and sinful man cannot occur. “Propitiation,” which starts with the prefix *pro-*, meaning “for” or “toward,” is directed toward God and is for the purpose of satisfying, assuaging, or turning away His wrath against sin. The sacrifice of Jesus for our sins fulfils God's righteous penalty for sin and therefore turns away His wrath from us. In other words, Jesus *propitiates* the wrath of God by taking it upon Himself in our place, making possible our reconciliation with God.

From the definition of these two terms, we can see how they are related and also how they are different. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ accomplishes both expiation and propitiation. Linguistically, one expiates a problem (by removing it) and propitiates a person (by making them favorable toward you). The object of expiation is our sins, which are paid for in the death of Christ, resulting in our forgiveness and cleansing. The object of propitiation is God, in the assuaging or turning away of His righteous anger. Expiation is primarily manward, removing our guilt; propitiation is primarily Godward, satisfying His wrath.

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In the Septuagint, the Greek word *hilastērion*, is used to translate the Hebrew word *kapporeth*, which refers to the mercy seat, or lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The mercy seat was the location where the high priest sprinkled the blood on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*; *kippur*, “atonement” is related to *kapporeth*) (cp. Lev. 16:14-15). Thus, the mercy seat was the location where atonement occurred. The purpose of the ritual on the Day of Atonement was both expiation—cleansing the nation of Israel for the sins—and propitiation—turning away the wrath of God. Indeed, the mercy seat was fundamentally the *place* of both *expiation* and *propitiation*.

This Greek word, *hilastērion* (*ἱλαστήριον*), is used twice in the New Testament:

²³For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:23-26).

Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing **the mercy seat**. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail (Hebrews 9:5).

In Romans, Paul says that Jesus Christ is “a propitiation” by His blood. In the same way that the sprinkled blood on the day of atonement caused God to forbear or pass over the sins of His people, the blood of Christ propitiates or satisfies God’s wrath. In Hebrews, the writer uses *hilastērion* to refer directly to the mercy seat, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant and the place where propitiation or turning way of God’s wrath occurred on the Day of Atonement. You could even consider the mercy seat (and by extension, Jesus Christ) as a cover or shield which protects elect sinners from God’s wrath by deflecting it away from them.

The writer of Hebrews also uses the verb form of this Greek word, *hilaskesthai* (*ἱλάσκεσθαι*):

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, **to make propitiation** for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17).

In this reference, the primary focus is not on Jesus as the sacrifice whose blood propitiates or satisfies God’s wrath, but rather as the High Priest, who offers up the sacrifice for propitiation on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is both our great High Priest and the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29).

The last two references to “propitiation” in the New Testament, *hilasmos* (*ἱλασμός*) and *hilasmon* (*ἱλασμόν*), are found in John’s first epistle:

²He is **the propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.... ¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be **the propitiation** for our sins (1 John 2:2; 4:10)

John calls Jesus “the propitiation for our sins” because He is our righteous Advocate who takes our place and turns away God’s anger.

Both expiation and propitiation are important aspects of the atonement. If we emphasize one at the expense of the other, we are in danger of distorting the full meaning of Christ’s sacrifice. If we focus on expiation and disregard propitiation, we ignore God’s real wrath toward sin and His

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holy justice that must be satisfied. If we focus only on propitiation and overlook expiation, we fail to acknowledge that sinful man must be forgiven and cleansed. Only a proper balance of both the manward and Godward aspects of Jesus's Christ's atoning work at Calvary paints the complete picture of the salvation we experience: freedom from the guilt of sin (via expiation) and restoration to fellowship with a satisfied God (via propitiation).

A proper understanding of both of these theological terms leads to the theme of today's passage: *The blood of Jesus expiates our sins, removing our guilt, cleansing us from sin, and granting us forgiveness; His sacrifice also propitiates or turns away the wrath of God against our sins, reconciling us to Himself.*

A. A Fountain (Zechariah 13:1)

¹*“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.*

Chapter 13 opens up with several linguistic connections to the previous passage that link them together. First, “on that day” is repeated, suggesting a continuation of thought with the mourning that takes place “on that day” (12:11) when they look upon the pierced One. Furthermore, notice that the people of God are designated the same way here—*the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem*—as they were in 12:7, 8, and 10. As we have seen in our previous studies in chapter 12, these designations represent the entirety of the elect, from greatest to least in the City of God.

Despite these descriptions being rooted in Old Testament language, the blessings contained herein are for the church of Jesus Christ, the spiritual heirs of Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem. Although there are those (e.g., dispensationalists) who view Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church as separate entities with different destinies, in doing so they neglect the clear New Testament teaching of the essential unity of the people of God. For example:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6).

The promises of the Old Testament are indeed for me and you in the church of Jesus Christ.

1. Expiation

Closely connected to the regeneration, faith, and repentance that we saw in Zechariah 12:10-14, we now have in 13:1 *a fountain...to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness*. This fountain is one that accomplishes *expiation*, because it removes both the defilement of sin and the impurity that is caused by sin. It is exactly what the guilty conscience needs. The one who truly mourns their sin and is grieved by the Messiah dying on the cross for sin's penalty, is also acutely aware of their own guilt and shame that nailed the Savior to that tree. What they need is true forgiveness and a pardon from sin that cleanses the conscience and removes all guilt.

The picture of a *fountain* has previously been used in the Old Testament Scriptures to describe spiritual life that is derived in and through a right relationship with God:

For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light do we see light (Psalm 36:9).

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The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,
that one may turn away from the snares of death (Proverbs 14:27).

For my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:13).

For a people living in the dry and arid environment of Palestine, the image of the fountain is a powerful one. Unlike the wadis or streams of the desert that would often dry out and lose all moisture in the summer heat, the fountain was a continuous spring of fresh, flowing, life-giving water. Notice that Zechariah says that the fountain *shall be...opened*. This is not a natural fountain, an underground spring bubbling up at an oasis in the desert (e.g., Ex. 15:27); this is a special fountain, one that is provided at exactly the right time by the LORD in His providence, *on that day*. “Zechariah foresees a whole fountain of...cleansing fluid opening up, not just a sprinkling but an abounding, flooding provision of grace, as the remedy for the great sorrow of those who look on the One whom they pierced. The idea is that of a pent-up spring now let loose, so that waters long confined may now gush forth in abundance” (Phillips, p. 281). It is God who provides abundant and permanent life for His people as He opens up this fountain for them.

The fountain is opened *to cleanse* the people of God. “Cleansing” is an important topic in the Old Testament. It was foundational to the entire practice of the Hebrew religion. The bronze laver of cleansing was located near the entrance to the tabernacle (and later temple); it was to be used by the priests during their daily service for washing and cleansing (Ex. 30:17-21). The high priest needed to be washed with water prior to carrying out the services of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:4). When Levites were set apart and consecrated for service, they were first cleansed by sprinkling with the water of purification (Num. 8:6-7). And the ashes of the red heifer were added to water to cleanse from impurity caused by coming into contact with dead persons (Num. 19:9-13; cp. Heb. 9:13).

Only those who were ceremonially “clean” could approach God’s holy house. Those who were ritually “unclean” first needed to be cleansed and purified before they could draw near. These ceremonial categories of “clean” and “unclean” thus pictured for the people of Israel something of the spiritual defilement caused by sin.

Indeed, all of this ritual washing and cleansing for purification portrayed in the Old Testament speaks to our greater spiritual need for cleansing *from sin and uncleanness*. “The word ‘sin’ here refers to the guilt, and ‘uncleanness’ to the defilement of moral evil, and this verse teaches the Jews that mere ceremonial observances are not sufficient to remove them” (Moore, p. 286). William Shakespeare portrayed this truth vividly when he had a guilt-ridden Macbeth say after his murder of the king, Duncan:

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 2).

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True moral guilt for sins committed against our holy and righteous God cannot be simply removed by washing our hands (a truth Lady Macbeth first denies but later learns to her regret); greater cleansing is necessary, a purification that only comes from God. Again, Zechariah is not the first prophet to identify the need for God’s people to receive spiritual cleansing from sin and defilement:

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 35:25-26).

Given that this fountain of cleansing for sin and uncleanness is opened up “on that day” and is associated with the mourning of repentance from those who look upon the pierced One, it is an appropriate metaphor for the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. This fountain of cleansing doesn’t contain fresh water; instead, it flows with the precious blood of the Savior shed for sinners on the cross. After all, the apostle John reminds us, “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). The writer to the Hebrews connects the purification rituals of the Old Testament to the greater cleansing power of the blood of Jesus:

¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (Hebrews 9:13-14).

In fact, the apostle John connects both the water of purification from the Old Testament with the blood of cleansing in the New Testament when he describes the “pierced One” upon the cross:

³⁴But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. ³⁵He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. ³⁶For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” ³⁷And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced” (John 19:34-37).

When Jesus was pierced by the Roman soldier’s spear, both water and blood flowed from His side. James Boice explains the significance:

What did John have in mind? When he saw the surprising issue of blood and water from the side of Christ, he must have remembered (what Jew would not!) that in the Old Testament sacrificial system, blood was the appointed means of cleansing sin, and that in the temple ceremonies, water was used for ceremonial purification from uncleanness. Moreover, he would have known that the passage he was quoting from Zechariah (Zech. 12:10)...is followed four verses later by the text we are considering.... Seeing the flow of blood and water and putting these two bits of information together, John must have concluded that deliverance from sin’s penalty and cleansing from its defilement are to be found in the death of Jesus only (Boice, p. 215).

*On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness. Zechariah’s prophecy of God’s gracious provision for cleansing, forgiveness, and pardon is a beautiful picture of the *expiation* that is provided by the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ. In that act of expiating our sin, He has*

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removed our guilt, cleansed us from sin, and granted us forgiveness and pardon. This is exactly what guilty sinners need.

William Cowper, the 18th century British poet, suffered bouts of panic and depression for most of his life. Nevertheless, he was able to find hope of forgiveness and cleansing from the guilt of sin, even in the midst of his earthly struggles. He captured the essence of Zechariah's message of expiation in one of his most famous hymns, *There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood*:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains:
Lose all their guilty stains,
Lose all their guilty stains;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

2. Propitiation

The *fountain* that is opened *on that day*, which contains the cleansing blood of Jesus, not only expiates the guilt for our sins, but it also *propitiates* the wrath of God against guilty sinners. “God’s wrath arises from His holy character; being holy, He must hate sin. We see, then, why we desperately need a propitiation to avert God’s wrath from us, since our sin is such an offense to His holiness” (Phillips, p. 283).

The Israelites of the Old Testament were very much aware of God’s wrath, because it was so often directed against them for their constant failures to remain faithful to their covenant Lord. Indeed, the concept of propitiation was ingrained into the sacrificial system in the law of Moses. Since “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18), and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), the constant parade of animals sacrificed at the tabernacle and temple was a mute testimony to the ubiquitous presence of sin, and hence God’s wrath that needed appeasement. Seventeen times in the book of Leviticus and eighteen times in the book of Numbers burning sacrifices are described as “a pleasing aroma” to the LORD. The sweet savor of the sacrifices pleased God and assuaged His wrath.

The Old Testament Israelite understood this propitiation at a personal level, since the worshiper identified himself with the sacrificial animal to be slain in his place:

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him (Leviticus 1:4).

The laying on of hands was a symbolic gesture which connected the worshiper with the animal. It figuratively transferred the sinner’s guilt to the sacrifice, which was then killed in place of the participant. This embodied the principle of vicarious atonement, where the death of a substitute is accepted in place of the offeror. Of course, the vicarious atonement pictured by the death of sacrificial animals was only a type of the complete salvation that we have through Jesus Christ. And yet, the Old Testament clearly anticipated the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ to propitiate the wrath of God:

⁴Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;

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yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the sacrifice had a value to the one making the offering. Although impoverished Israelites were exempted from sacrificing costly animals, such as bulls or goats, they still were required to pay for two turtledoves or pigeons (Lev. 5:7; cp. Lk. 2:24). In the most extreme cases of poverty, they could even substitute a small amount of flour (Lev. 5:11). The point is that in order for it to be a real sacrifice, it needed to be expensive, because it was a reminder of the costliness of sin. Thus, when Araunah offered to donate his oxen to David for a sacrifice, the king replied, “No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (1 Sam. 24:24).

Propitiation is costly. It requires our death to turn away God’s wrath against our sin, or the death of a worthy substitute. Ultimately, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was unable to guarantee our salvation, because “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Only the infinitely precious blood of the Son of God is valuable enough to secure our redemption and satisfy God’s holy wrath and justice.

This brings out the ironic truth that only God the Son is able to propitiate the wrath of God the Father. The Sovereign LORD is the one who opens up the fountain of cleansing, the blood of Christ which satisfy the righteous demands of the law and turns aside His own wrath. Phillips explains:

What this verse tells us is that God Himself provides the sacrifice to accomplish this propitiation. Because God loved us, He sent His only Son to die in our place so that His holy justice might be satisfied in Christ’s blood. God’s wrath is propitiated by a sacrifice. To trust in God, then, is to know that God’s anger has been turned from you to the cross and, henceforth, you may look to God without fear of judgment (Phillips, p. 283).

What a Savior! What a God! What a glorious salvation! The fountain of cleansing has been opened up for us. Let us look upon the One who was pierced for our transgressions, mourn our sin, and flee to the fountain, Jesus Christ. Although it was the will of God the Father to crush Him, and it was the will of God the Son to submit to the will of the Father, Christ has been vindicated through His resurrection and now “always lives to make intercession for us” (Heb. 7:25). The ending of the great prophecy of the Suffering Servant proclaims His victory in making atonement for us:

¹⁰Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;

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the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹²Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53:10-12).

B. For Cleansing (Zechariah 13:2-6)

Verse 1 of chapter 13 describes the fountain for cleansing that is opened up for sinners through the expiatory and propitiatory atonement of Jesus Christ. In terms of the *ordo salutis*, the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God accomplished at the cross is applied to the converted soul at the time of *justification*, which is “an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (WCF SC Q&A 33).

Justification is just the starting point of the Christian life. “Sin affects us through its guilt, but also through its power over our lives, and the impurity it works in our hearts. For this the fountain provides cleansing water to purify our hearts for new obedience and eternal life....God always saves us from both the guilt and the power of sin, so we can never be forgiven without being called to a new life of obedience” (Phillips, pp. 285-286).

The one who receives the fountain of cleansing from sin and uncleanness is recreated as a redeemed soul “after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Indeed, for the rest of their lives, Christians are constantly challenged to grow more like Christ in thought, word, and deed. We call this process *sanctification*, which is “the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness” (WCF SC Q&A 35). Sanctification is the primary subject of verses 2-6.

God’s people must forsake their past sinful lifestyles and live in new obedience to God’s word if they are to be holy as the LORD is holy (cp. Lev. 19:2). As Zechariah unfolds this truth to his original Jewish audience, he focuses on the removal of the two great besetting sins in the history of ancient Israel: idolatry and false prophecy. “These had corrupted the national life of Israel and represent all types of ungodly and immoral behavior that marred the profession of God’s people. The LORD takes decisive action to remove them from the life of the church. Indeed, those who are renewed by God’s grace will strive to have all that is offensive to him eradicated from their fellowship” (Mackay, p. 242).

1. Idolatry (13:2a)

²“And on that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more.

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Idolatry is anything that stands in the place of God and receives our attention, our adulation, and our worship, usurping the right position of the LORD as the king of our hearts. It had plagued the Old Testament nation of Israel, as they constantly sought to be like the other nations around them in their worship of false gods. Although most moderns today would scoff at the pagan idolatry and belief systems of the ancients, we are no less susceptible to holding a world view that rejects the one true God and replaces Him in our lives with material pleasures, ungodly pursuits, and humanistic philosophies.

But here we see the cleansing grace of God in removing idolatry not only from our hearts, but from our Christian communities, signified by the reference to *the land*. Progressive sanctification removes our idols, one by one, as our attention is drawn away from those things that cannot satisfy and directed toward the giver of every good and perfect gift (cp. James 1:17). “In the cleansing fountain of the cross of Christ, our hearts are renewed so that idols are removed and we are drawn to worship God in spirit and in truth (see John 4:23). Ultimately, as the progressive work of Christian sanctification goes forward, the very names of our idols will be removed and they will not even be remembered anymore” (Phillips, pp. 286-287).

2. False Prophets (13:2b-6)

a) *Removed by God (13:2b)*

And also I will remove from the land the prophets and the spirit of uncleanness.

False prophecy goes hand-in-hand with false worship of idols. For example, the prophets of Baal employed by Ahab and Jezebel (see 1 Kgs. 18:17-40) are clear examples of a direct link between false prophecy and idolatry. However, the Old Testament also records how false prophets, supposedly speaking on behalf of the LORD, would proclaim pleasant and pleasing things that the people wanted to hear, rather than the hard truths of God’s word.

For example, the prophet Jeremiah was called by God to enact a visual prophecy by strapping yoke-bars around his neck to indicate that Judah and the surrounding nations would be yoked in slavery by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Jer. 27:1-13). Jeremiah specifically said to King Zedekiah of Judah:

¹⁴“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, ‘You shall not serve the king of Babylon,’ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you. ¹⁵I have not sent them, declares the Lord, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you” (Jeremiah 27:14-15).

In response to Jeremiah’s prophecy, a false prophet by the name of Hananiah declared that the LORD had “broken the yoke of the king of Babylon” (Jer. 28:2). He further prophesied restoration of goods and captives already taken to Babylon within two years. Undoubtedly, the people who heard both Jeremiah’s prophecy and Hananiah’s prophecy were more likely to “like” the message of the false prophet over that of the true. When Jeremiah challenged Hananiah, the false prophet responded by striking off the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and doubling down on his false predictions of peace and prosperity (Jer. 28:10-11). Shortly thereafter, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah again:

¹⁵And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶Therefore thus says the

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LORD: ‘Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD’” (Jeremiah 28:15-16).

Within two months of God’s judgment being pronounced on Hananiah, the false prophet was dead (Jer. 28:17; cp. Jer. 28:1). Seven years later, Jerusalem was destroyed, and Judah went away into captivity, under the yoke of bondage to Babylon.

God removed the false prophet Hananiah, and here in Zechariah He promises to remove all such false prophets from the land. He also promises to remove their *spirit of uncleanness*, which stands in deliberate contrast to the *spirit of grace and pleas for mercy* (12:10), referring to the Holy Spirit. The source of inspiration for true prophets speaking the Word of the LORD is the Holy Spirit, while the false prophets have no such source; their lies come from a spirit of uncleanness and defilement that is in opposition to all that is holy and true.

The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy will have to wait until our glorification in heaven, since the New Testament makes it clear that false prophets and teachers would continue to work their way into the church until the end of the age (cp. Mt. 24:24; Acts 20:28-30; 1 Tim. 6:3; 1 Pe. 2:1; 1 Jn. 4:1; Jude 4). And yet, if we have been cleansed by the fountain of Jesus’ blood, then we will recognize and reject these “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” even as God has also rejected them.

b) Removed by Others (13:3)

³*And if anyone again prophesies, his father and mother who bore him will say to him, ‘You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the LORD.’ And his father and mother who bore him shall pierce him through when he prophesies.*

To demonstrate how strongly the redeemed people of God will reject false teachers and prophets from their midst, verse 3 pictures a hypothetical situation that is anticipated in the law of Moses:

⁶“If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which neither you nor your fathers have known, ⁷some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, ⁸you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. ⁹But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. ¹⁰You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deuteronomy 13:6-10; cp. 18:20).

Here is true devotion to the Lord, when the people of God will place their fidelity to His word above the bonds of filial love. “The prodigal boy may be despised and hated by all the world, and yet the heart of the father will yearn kindly toward the hapless outcast, and the arms of the mother will be ever ready to fold him in forgiving love. Now the love of duty that can surpass an affection like this, must be of a most controlling character” (Moore, p. 288).

The penalty envisioned by Zechariah is ironically fitting: even as Jesus was “pierced” in place of us to atone for our sins (Zech. 12:10), the false prophet will likewise be *pierced* to pay for his own sins. The message seems clear: those who persist in a spirit of uncleanness will suffer the consequences of their sin, while those who turn to LORD in the spirit of grace and supplication will have their sins covered by the blood of Christ.

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c) *Removed by Themselves (13:4-6)*

⁴“On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive, ⁵but he will say, ‘I am no prophet, I am a worker of the soil, for a man sold me in my youth.’ ⁶And if one asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your back?’ he will say, ‘The wounds I received in the house of my friends.’”

In verses 4-6, Zechariah portrays the removal of false prophets from the land in yet a third way. The situation described here is of a false prophet, so ashamed of his infidelity, that he abandons his former profession and denies that he ever engaged in a ministry of deception. This turnaround is described in three different ways.

First, the false prophet *will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive*. Apparently, the rough, hairy clothing worn by Elijah (cp. 2 Kgs. 1:8) and later emulated by the last prophet, John the Baptist (Mt. 3:4), had become sort of a badge or uniform of a true prophet. The false prophet, wishing to deceive his audience, would take up this mantle of authority to enhance the authenticity of whatever fabrications he proclaimed. But now, ashamed of his role in such perversions of God’s truth, and in the face of the community’s enhanced intolerance against such falsehood, he puts the emblem of his former profession aside.

Secondly, he verbally denies his former association with the prophetic office, declaring: *I am no prophet, I am a worker of the soil, for a man sold me in my youth*. The description of his profession is literally “one tilling the soil,” and so likely a reference, not to a land-owner, but to a farm hand, suggesting an inferior social status. His humble condition is further stressed by claiming that he is no better than a slave, having been in that economic condition since he was a boy. How the once-proud and self-centered false prophet has been brought low!

Finally, when confronted with undeniable evidence of his prophetic past, he vehemently denies it. The phrase *on your back* literally means “between your hands” or “between your arms.” It seems to be a colloquial expression that encompasses either the chest or the back; that is, the torso of the body between the arms and hands. The reference to *wounds on your back* is suggestive of the self-flagellation and cutting that false prophets would engage upon their bodies in service to false gods. One such example of this is the actions of the prophets of Baal in their contest on Mt. Carmel against Elijah (1 Kgs. 18:28).

Rather than admitting his former service to false gods, the ashamed prophet will make up any excuse, however feeble to explain away the evidence: *The wounds I received in the house of my friends*. Mackay explains:

This is...the cover story put up by the ex-prophet to account for the scars on His body. “I got them in a drunken brawl with my friends.” There is an element of irony in the answer in that “friends” or “lovers” could be used to refer to false deities (Hos. 2:5, 13; Ez. 16:36), and so the words may be heard as “in the temples of false deities.” But this is no frank confession of his past, but an implausible excuse for the marks on his body. He will explain away anything that seems to link him with what he has been doing before, so utterly rejected is false prophecy and anyone who had anything to do with it (Mackay, pp. 245-246).

What a difference the cleansing fountain of Jesus’ blood makes! In a striking series of pictures, Zechariah has visually portrayed how removal of the guilt and defilement of sin, and reconciliation with God can positively impact the entire community of God’s people.

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Justification leads to sanctification, which ultimately results in glorification, the complete removal of sin and impurity forever.

Conclusion and Application

Zechariah's fountain provides us a wonderful metaphor for the atonement accomplished by Jesus Christ, which can be summarized as follows: *The blood of Jesus expiates our sins, removing our guilt, cleansing us from sin, and granting us forgiveness; His sacrifice also propitiates or turns away the wrath of God against our sins, reconciling us to Himself.*

As we have seen, the blood of our Savior provides *expiation* for sin by removing our guilt and defilement. His death on the cross pays the ransom price for our sins and secures our redemption, resulting in forgiveness, cleansing, and pardon. The New Testament speaks to the expiation accomplished by the blood of Christ:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7).

¹⁸Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The atonement of Jesus also provides *propitiation*, satisfying or turning away the wrath of God from us and making Him favorably inclined toward us. The end result of propitiation is reconciliation with God, being brought near to His presence and living at peace with Him. The New Testament also highlights this aspect of the atonement as well:

¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:13-14).

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19-20).

Cleansing from sin leading to reconciliation with God is what every man, woman and child in this world desperately needs. A cleansed heart leads to a cleansed life. Justification leads to sanctification, to a life that is lived *coram Deo*, before the face of God. And ultimately we will see Him face to face, when we are glorified forever in heaven. The Old Testament speaks of this cleansing in other passages besides Zechariah 13:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool (Isaiah 1:18).

The ultimate fulfillment of that cleansing is seen in the New Testament:

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:13-14).

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This theme of cleansing from sin, contained in Zechariah 13:1, Isaiah 1:18, and Revelation 7:14, is wonderfully captured in Robert Lowry's well-known hymn, *What Can Wash Away My Sin?*:

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

For next time: Read Zechariah 13:7-9.