

THE ACCUSER HAS BEEN THROWN DOWN

TEXT: REVELATION 12:7-12

INTRODUCTION:

Few things are as spiritually paralyzing to the Christian than a guilty, accusing conscience. A guilty, accusing conscience tells you that you are under God's wrath for your sin. If your conscience is under the guilt of sin and the wrath of God, you cannot live unto God. In fact, a guilty conscience causes you to commit more sin and flee from God's presence (cf. Gen. 3:8-10)!

In 1692, Walter Marshall spoke the following words to his congregation who had been brought under the slavery and bondage of a false gospel- Neonomianism- and thus were struggling with a guilty conscience:

When you have an evil, guilty conscience, you think God is your enemy. You think that His justice is against you, and that He will condemn you forever because of your sins. When you think this way, sin and satan actually have greater power over you. An evil conscience will move your soul away from godliness. It can even make you hate God, and wish there were no God, no heaven, and no hell- just so you can escape the punishment you deserve. An evil conscience can so turn people off to God that they cannot even endure to think, speak, or hear of Him and His law. Instead, they try to put Him out of their minds by sinful pleasures and other worldly activities. This process alienates them from true spirituality. It leads them into all kinds of strange religious performance, false religion, idolatry, and inhuman superstitions.

I am convinced that this is what happened to the first Adam. When he fell into sin, he fell under the wrath of God, and he of course received an evil guilty conscience. His guilty conscience told him that God was now against him, and that he was under God's curse for that one sin. This was enough to turn his love wholly away from God and toward creatures, and to desire to be completely hidden from the presence of God. Hence, the image of God's holiness in him was ruined. This is the origin of all sin against God and his holiness: malice, hatred, and anger flow from people whose conscience tells them that they have been alienated from God. Therefore, if you are going to serve God from a pure heart, you must be reconciled to God, and your conscience must be cleansed (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, pp. 32-33).

In addition to the accusations of a guilty conscience the enemy of our faith comes in as a zealous prosecutor and levels a crippling litany of accusations against us, "How can you call yourself a Christian? Look at what you have done?" Some times the guilt of past actions and failures paralyze our present. The most crippling part about the enemy's case against us is that it is right!

The truth is, we have blown it. Ecclesiastes 7:20, says, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” Similarly Psalm 14:2-3 states, “²The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. ³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” *The Heidelberg Catechism* teaches, “...my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil...” (Q. 60).

It is in moments when we are acutely aware of our sin and failure- perhaps overwhelmed by the grief of our sin and paralyzed by a guilty conscience- that we lose our sense of favor with the Father and begin to think of Him as our enemy. In the *Canons of Dort*, Article 5 under the Perseverance of the Saints, states, “By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God’s favor, until, when they change their course by serious repentance, the light of God’s fatherly countenance again shines upon them.”

When the believer’s conscience is in a wounded state, he begins to think of himself as a slave rather than a son. He begins to think- or at least lives like it- that he is hopelessly subjected to the power of the devil and our flesh. It is at this precise point that believers lose the ability to pursue holiness.

Instead of our lives being characterized by repentance and faith, increasing hardness and apathy characterizes them. We live more consciously aware of our failures than of a self-conscious awareness of Christ’s successes- His saving work for us.

UNDERSTAND THIS: It is no delight to our Lord to see you carrying your burden of conscious sin day after day and week after week. You cannot pursue holiness and obedience until you have once again received the comfort of the gospel. You cannot expect to overcome a guilty, accusatory conscience- let alone the accuser of your faith!- until you receive the comfort of the gospel.

Only the gospel can enable you to live to God in holiness. When you receive the comfort of the gospel, you will move toward holiness rather than lawless living. So, how do we receive gospel comfort? We receive it through faith?

Faith is uniquely designed by God to receive Christ and all of His saving benefits. When you believe in Christ, you cast away everything else that keeps you distant from Christ- including a paralyzing, guilty conscience!

Question and Answer 65 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* writes, “Since faith alone makes you share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.”

When we are paralyzed by a guilty conscience, we must hear the gospel and have it confirmed to us through the use of the sacraments. One of the great gospel texts that is full of comfort for guilty, accused consciences is found in Revelation 12:7-12.

Here at the center of Revelation, John sees visions that disclose the heart of the spiritual war that is raging against God's people. Vv. 7-12 fall into the second main division of Revelation (12-22). The central theme of the first main division (1-11) is carried over into the second (i.e., the victory of Christ and His church over the dragon and his helpers.).

In the first division we see the outward struggle between the Church and the world. In this second main division, we get the "behind the scenes" look into the source of this outward conflict. Behind the suffering, persecuted people of God lay evil, satanic spiritual beings that are relentless, powerful and cunning.

John reveals in dramatic imagery what Paul states in Ephesians 6:12, "...we do not struggle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

John's vision makes visible the invisible spiritual struggle that believers are engaged in. The struggle between the church and the world is an outward manifestation of the invisible war between Christ and satan.

A clear allusion to Genesis 3:15 is evident in Revelation 12. Revelation 12 depicts the story of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the dragon. The same characters appear in both texts and the same truth is proclaimed in both texts.

The words of promise are recorded in Gen. 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." The words of fulfillment are recorded in Rev. 12:7-12.

The "serpent" in Genesis 3 is satan and is the "dragon" and "ancient serpent" in Revelation 12. The woman's "seed" of Genesis 3 is the "male child" in Revelation 12:5. In Genesis 3:15 "her seed" promises Christ. In Revelation 12, the "seed"- Christ- has come (v. 10).

In Genesis 3, the conflict is announced. In Revelation 12, the conflict is resolved- Christ and His church are victorious! In this vision, John shows us the effect of Christ's birth, death and ascension to the throne in heaven.

John reveals two of satan's chief strategies in this conflict/warfare: deception (v. 9) and accusation (v. 10). If "the deceiver of the whole world" (v. 9) cannot get you to believe a false gospel then "the accuser of our brothers" will seek to paralyze you with crippling, accurate accusations (v. 10).

Also, in the background of John's vision in 12:7-12 is Zechariah 3. In Zechariah's vision, we have a glimpse into God's courtroom in heaven where satan—acting as the prosecuting attorney—attempts to bring crippling charges against Joshua, the defiled high priest.

In the heavenly courtroom the angel of the Lord—Christ—is seated as the judge. Joshua the postexilic high priest—one of the leaders of the returned exiles—is the defendant. And satan—his name means “the accuser”—is the prosecutor.

Satan has a very strong case against Joshua. Joshua was defiled, clothed with filthy garments (v. 3). In fact, Joshua was not merely clothed with filthy garments but, more precisely, clothed in garments soiled with excrement, which would automatically defile the wearer.

Joshua's defilement posed a severe problem for the people. First, as the High Priest, he was to be the very essence of purity/holiness (see Laney, *Zechariah*, p. 50). Since Joshua was the intermediary through whom the people of Israel's defilement was to be removed on the Day of Atonement under no circumstances was the High Priest to become defiled or unclean (Lev. 21:10-15).

Second, as the High Priest, he bore the names of the twelve tribes on his breastplate (Ex. 28:29) and thus represented the people of Israel before God. But, Joshua's filthy garments prevented him from such representation. His filthy garments exposed his guilty heart. Whereas Joshua's garments were to be most holy, his garments are defiled beyond measure. And so Joshua stands helpless before the judgment seat of God covered in his filthy garments, totally unable to do anything about his condition. And on top of this, satan stands as Joshua's prosecuting attorney ready to level accurate charges against him.

At this moment, Joshua must have been acutely aware of his guilt and defilement before God. Joshua had no defense! He was guilty as charged! But, the problem is not just with Joshua. As the High Priest, he was to be the intermediary for the people. Since he was defiled, there was no intermediary for the people. Thus, the whole nation of Israel also stood before God defiled and in need of spiritual cleansing.

Yet, despite Joshua's—and the people's—defilement, in an unexpected pronouncement of grace, the Lord ruled Satan's charges inadmissible before he could even present them! The angel of the Lord sets forth a double rebuke (v. 2)!

Joshua's position as one “plucked from the fire” (v. 2; i.e., brought safely from the exile) means that he is free from any and all charges/accusations/condemnation!

Notice as well in vv. 4-5 the two-fold action the Lord takes toward Joshua. First, the angel of the Lord (Christ) commands his servants to remove Joshua's defiled garments (iniquity). He cleanses Joshua from his iniquity (v. 4). The word “iniquity” (יִצְרָא) is derived from a verb that means “to bend” or “to twist” (Laney, *Zechariah*, p. 52). It

suggests a perversion or twisting from what is right and sometimes is used of the guilt or punishment incurred as a result of sin (Laney, pp. 52-53).

Second, the angel of the Lord clothes Joshua with pure vestments (vv. 4a-5). It was not enough for the Lord to remove Joshua's defiled garments. He also had to clothe Joshua with pure vestments. In fact, these new garments are not only clean (v. 5), they are the kind reserved for special occasions. Joshua is clothed with festive robes and crowned with a clean turban (vv. 4b-5).

By removing Joshua's iniquity and clothing him in pure vestments, Joshua is now made suitable to serve in the presence of God. He is a righteous High Priest who is able to make intercession for the people. The fact that God removes Joshua's defiled garments and clothes him with the proper garments shows that Joshua is unable to cleanse himself and defend himself. Unless God acts, Joshua stands defiled in his sin and condemned by the allegations of his accuser- satan.

The staggering Good News is that even though satan's case against Joshua was correct, it was ruled inadmissible in God's court! God ruled and acted on behalf of Joshua. Therefore, no charges could be brought against him. Joshua's judge also became his defense! The Angel of the Lord rebukes satan twice (v. 2). He disbars him from his courtroom. He silences his accusations. He removes Joshua's defiled garments and He covers Joshua in pure vestments. As a result, he renders Joshua free from any and all charges against him!

This is the background of John's vision in Revelation 12:7-12. The angel of the Lord in Zechariah is Christ, who brings Zechariah's vision to complete fulfillment. In John's vision in Revelation 12, we see the victory of Christ in the defeat of satan through his birth, death and ascension.

Note the language of vv. 7-12:

v. 8- the dragon—satan—is defeated;

vv. 9-10- the great dragon, ancient serpent, devil, satan, deceiver of the whole world, the accuser of our brothers- "has been thrown down" (4x);

The language of "thrown down" is not to be understood in a wooden, literal sense. Rather, the accuser of the brothers has been "thrown down" by the blood of the Lamb—Christ's death on the cross (v. 11). The one who accuses believers day and night has been conquered by the Great High Priest who always lives to make intercession for His people (Heb. 7:25)!

Even though our enemy's accusations are true, they are not admissible in God's courtroom. Christ has achieved the decisive victory. Complete satisfaction for our sin has been accomplished. Therefore, satan, try as he may, has lost all ground of justice for his accusations against us (vv. 7-9)!

In Colossians 2:14-15 Paul writes, “¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

The dragon’s ability to accuse and bring us under the condemnation of charges has been removed (v. 10). Your accuser can no longer justly accuse you. The harassment you are undergoing for your sin and guilt is evidence that the accuser has been cast down. He no longer has any standing in God’s courtroom.

Listen to Paul in Romans 8:33-34, “³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

If God, the Judge, no longer condemns you, why do you continue to condemn yourself? Continual, self-centered, self-condemnation—carrying your burden of conscious sin day after day and week after week—is not humility but rather unbelief! Christ died to cleanse you of your guilty conscience rather than to wallow in it and become paralyzed by it.

Thinking back again to Zechariah’s vision of Joshua, the defiled priest, standing accurately accused and condemned before Christ, the Judge, we see what a great picture it is of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer.

Just as Joshua’s defiled garments were removed and he was clothed with pure vestments, so too through faith in Christ alone, our sin and defilement are removed by the person and work of Christ. Christ’s very righteousness- which He merited in His life through perfect law keeping- is placed on us like pure vestments.

Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to our account so that we stand before God free from all accusations of our accuser. 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Like Joshua, we receive clean garments by grace apart from any meritorious act on our part (Galatians 2:16, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”).

Through the gospel, the salvation and kingdom of God have come (v. 10). And even though skirmishes and battles continue for a short time (v. 12), the war has been won and the outcome is certain—both for those who trust in Christ’s victory and satan’s ultimate defeat.

Our accuser has been disbarred from his law practice. Though he continues to act as our prosecuting attorney, his charges are dismissed. Jesus, our Great High Priest, now serves as our defense attorney- “advocate”- in God’s courtroom (1 John 2:1, “...if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”).

REFLECTION:

In Revelation 12, we see that satan has been defeated. He has been cast out of the heavenly courtroom where he accuses the saints day and night. Jesus, our Great High Priest, is at the Father's right hand, reigning as the conquering King in the seat of all power and authority as our defense attorney, interceding for us!

“The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down...!”

Thinking back then to Q. 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism and our guilty conscience, listen to the rest of the context,

60. Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ. He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.”

What good news! Because of this great gospel truth, we do not have to go on living day after day under the oppressive accusations of the enemy. We don't have to be paralyzed by a guilty conscience.

Instead, through faith alone we can rest in the Good News that the great dragon- our accuser- has been conquered by the blood of the Lamb and that all who hold to the testimony of this conquering Lamb share in this victory (v. 11). Listen to these words of comfort and consolation by Octavious Winslow,

“As our deepest sorrow flows from a sense of sin, so our deepest joy springs from a sense of its forgiveness... This comfort have all the saints. Your sins, O believer, are forgiven. ‘I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins,’ says God (Isa. 44:22). You are not called upon to believe that God will pardon, but that He has pardoned you. Forgiveness is a past act; the sense of it written upon the conscience is a present one. ‘For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified’ (Heb. 10:14), has forever put away their sins...

Thus, beloved, God comforts His conscience-troubled people. He loves so to speak to their hearts! Is it any delight to Him to see you carrying your burden of conscious sin day after day and week after week? Ah, no! He has procured the means of your pardon at a great price-nothing less than the sacrifice of His beloved Son- and will not the same love which procured your forgiveness, speak

it to your heart?...Is sin your trouble? Does conscious guilt cast you down? Look up, disconsolate soul! There is forgiveness with God. It is in His heart to pardon you” (“How Does God Comfort?,” quoted in *Free Grace Broadcaster*, issue 194, Winter 2005, p. 48).

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