

The day of small things

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[0 : 00] Well, as we are all too well aware, we are living in difficult days for the church, days when our visibility is minimal.

There are no big gatherings of the church, no polished worship services for people to walk into. And in the frustration of the day, some leaders in different parts of the church are tempted to flex a bit of muscle and push back at the restrictions.

And yet it's often been in history that it is when God has seemed most absent that he has actually been most powerfully at work.

And into our situation of apparent discouragement comes a word of encouragement, which I trust that all of us will take to heart this evening from the Lord.

Who dares despise the day of small things? Here's a reminder this evening for us in the midst of lockdown, a reminder of where the power for building the church of Jesus Christ is to be found.

[1 : 18] Well, dreams are strange things. And if you dream before you waken up, then if it has been a vivid or a frightening experience, you can wake up feeling exhausted.

And that being the case, spare a thought for poor old Zechariah. On the night of the 25th of February, 519, he had a series of visions in the night.

Visions which are at times bizarre. Visions which are full of significant detail. Visions which demand his full attention.

Apocalyptic literature, such as this part of Zechariah, is given to a discouraged people to encourage them, just like revelation is given to the people of its time.

He wakens up in something of a... He is not awake, but is in something of a stupor after seeing the first four visions.

[2 : 30] And the angel gives him, as it were, a shake-up in order that he might be attentive for vision number five. Note, he is aroused like someone aroused from sleep.

So he's not fully awake yet, but is just in a more alert condition. Because vision five is something he cannot afford to miss.

It is full of hope for a discouraged people. Full of Christ, full of practical implications. A word about the context of this chapter.

God's people were sent into exile in Babylon because of their repeated rebellion against God. And in 538 BC, Cyrus the Persian, who had conquered the Babylonians, had issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland.

And around 50,000 of them did return and began rebuilding the temple. Two years later, the foundation of the temple was rebuilt.

[3 : 34] However, opposition from the surrounding peoples and the weak character of the Jews themselves meant that the work ceased for 16 years until in 520 BC, the Lord sent Haggai and Zechariah to exhort the people to complete the work.

And so Zechariah is given a message from God in apocalyptic form with these vivid images to encourage a discouraged people. And on that evening of revelation, he was assured that God would be with his people.

Second, that he would raise up leaders to overcome their foes. And third, that God would have great purposes for his city. Now, these promises given by God brought natural obstacles to mind. And the first of these obstacles was the problem of their sin. The people were in the situation they were in because of sinfulness. And so a vision is given of Joshua, the priest with filthy garments, but these garments being removed and replaced with clean ones.

It's a wonderful picture. And of course, as Christians, we can't but read it, but see another Joshua, Jesus, being our substitute, being the one who will provide us with raiments of righteousness.

[5 : 11] So if the first problem is the sinfulness of the people, the second one is their powerlessness. And that problem is raised and answered in chapter four's vision.

How can a weak, defeated people rise to accomplish the huge task that lies ahead of them? Now, this, of course, is a very pertinent question for all of us.

All of us who are aware of our weakness, who have any kind of sense of the overwhelming nature of the challenge of building Christ's church in our day, must feel.

And especially in these days of COVID-19 lockdown, we feel our weakness even more. We're separated from one another, unable to even sing corporately the praises of God.

And we have an important encouragement, a reminder of where our true power lies. Now, before we look at the application of the vision, it's important for us to understand exactly what it is that Zechariah actually sees.

[6 : 26] The NIV reads, I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it with seven channels to the lamps.

And so in our mind's eye, we tend to think of the typical Jewish menorah or lampstand, the lamp with three branches on either side of a central branch, adding up to seven lights in total.

And that would indeed fit in with the golden lampstand in the tabernacle, as it's described in Exodus 25, 31 and 32. But that's almost certainly not what Zechariah saw.

The Hebrew text speaks of seven and seven lamps, pointed to 49 in total. So each lamp had seven lips on the edge, allowing for a wick to be inserted.

Individual lamps looking like bowls with seven lips pinched in the clay for wicks have actually been found in archaeological digs and confirm the unusual description here.

[7 : 36] So Zechariah, who remember was of a priestly line and would be familiar with the traditional menorah, saw something that was strikingly different.

He saw a lampstand with a bowl above it with seven smaller lamps fixed on the rim of the basin and with each of the seven lamps having seven wicks.

So what Zechariah saw in his heightened visionary perception was a brilliant sight. A golden candelabra with 49 lamps blazing from it.

Spiritually, of course, seven is perfection in the Bible and seven times seven simply compounds the fact that this is a vision from God of deep significance.

On either side of the lamp are two olive trees. And verse 12 tells us that from each of the olive trees there is a golden pipe that pours out golden oil.

[8 : 43] It's a stunning sight. And Zechariah asks, What are these, my Lord? He answered, Do you not know what these are? No, my Lord, I replied. And at this point, Calvin, in his commentary, sees this as an encouragement to us as believers to acknowledge our lack of understanding and to press on in asking God to show us because God delights to give more understanding.

Well, at first sight, the angel's response doesn't seem to answer Zechariah's question, but instead makes a kind of application, not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

One commentator puts it like this. He says, Apocalyptic visions aren't picture books, sorry, are picture books, not puzzle books. So we're not given a one-on-one correspondence of the details, but an overall impact from the vision of what's most important.

Notice that the vision is for the benefit of, in this case, Zerubbabel. The previous vision was for Joshua, who was the spiritual leader.

This vision is given for Zerubbabel, who is the civil leader. It's a vision, remember, given to answer the question, from where do we find the power for the task of rebuilding the temple?

[10 : 06] It's a Zerubbabel kind of question. That was his job. That was his responsibility. And as we move forward now, I want to look at the task facing Zerubbabel and us also, by extension, represented by the image of the golden lampstand.

The challenge pictured as a mountain to be removed and the resources as the never-ending supply of oil. God gives the challenge resulting from the vision.

Who dares despise the day of small things? Well, first of all, the task at its most basic was the rebuilding of the temple after the work had ceased. But we're to see it as much more than simply a building project.

This wasn't simply a project to enhance the prestige of the Jewish returnees. There was something spiritual at stake. And the vision, focusing as it does on the golden lampstand, brings out the nature of this task.

The lampstand, with all of its temple associations, speaks to Zerubbabel and to us of the purpose of the temple. The temple was where God was pleased to presence himself and reveal his glory.

[11:32] For you are my lamp, O Lord, David sang, and my God lightens my darkness. And Isaiah, in Isaiah 9-2, prophesied that when Messiah came, the people who dwelt in darkness would see a great light.

And of course, when God does come in Christ, he declares, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

Jesus is the fulfilment of all that the temple with its lampstand represented. The light of God dwelling among his people.

And so in Revelation 21-23, we read, The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

So, the lampstand stands for the presence of God, the light of God. It also stands for the people of God. God's plan for his people was to be a light for the nations.

[12:41] Isaiah 42-6, and Jesus pictures his followers in much the same way, saying, You are the light of the world. So, in short, the lampstand represent, and the temple represents God's design to dwell amongst his people and display his glory to them, a glory that is then reflected out by the people of God to the world.

And right throughout the Bible, we see this grand design of God represented as a temple-building story.

So, there's a sense in which the Garden of Eden was like a temple where God met with Adam and Eve. And then, when the people are in the desert, in their desert wanderings, and are living in tents, what does God do?

He presences himself in a tent, in the tabernacle. And then, when the people are settled in Canaan and are living in stone buildings, God presences himself in the temple.

God symbolises his presence as in, as it were, a house amongst the houses of his people.

[14:12] And now that we are the new people of God, no longer with a special building, but with the promise of Jesus in our midst when we gather, we have that temple promise fulfilled and continuing.

We meet with God and we behold his glory in order that we, as people who are sent out from the gathering of God's people, might reflect his glory into the world around us.

And that is what is so special about our Lord's Day gatherings. Paul puts it like this in 2 Corinthians 3, 17 to 18.

Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all who, with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

So the task facing Zerubbabel is realising the goal of God's presence as a light to his people, who are then in turn to be a light to the world.

[15:33] And that is the same task facing us in our day. Not the building of a temple, not the building of physical churches with bricks and mortar, but the building of a church who will behold God's glory and reflect it into the world.

But secondly, that was no easy thing for Zerubbabel. There's considerable challenge because the work had been discontinued for 16 years.

The people were discouraged. They had made moral compromises. Haggai 1 and 3, then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai, is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses while this house remains a ruin?

So the challenge that was facing Zerubbabel was an enormous one. The people had settled into their situation.

They had given up hope. They were simply making the best of things by merging in with the Gentile people around them. The political situation was very uncertain.

[16:54] Darius was now emperor and he wasn't a descendant of Cyrus who had issued the initial decree, but he was a conqueror of Babylon.

He had no knowledge of why the Jews were there. And the locals were scheming against them and Zerubbabel felt the pressure on him mounting with every passing day.

And the sight of the foundation lying there undisturbed was a continual reproach to him. It was a sign of spiritual failure.

Little wonder then that the Lord refers to the challenge facing Zerubbabel as a mountain. And of course, as Christians, our challenge in church building is also mountainous. Christians are no longer mainstream. We've been accustomed to that for a long time. We're a small minority without the privileged position that other minorities have.

[17 : 57] older generations perhaps have lived long enough to see the church shrink, but the new generation rising up have really little contact with the church and little biblical knowledge of any kind.

And now COVID and the new lockdown has brought on us a new level of anxiety and we're no longer able to assemble together.

We face a mountain of a challenge. But God promises resources for meeting the challenge.

God promises resources for building his temple and hence his church. First of all, he sets down a spiritual principle. This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty. What are you, mighty mountain?

[18 : 59] Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of God bless it, God bless it.

So the Lord here sets before Zerubbabel and the people only two options. They will either strive to work on the basis of human might and power or on the basis of his Holy Spirit.

Might and power are very similar Hebrew words. Might refers to numbers and power refers to strength. And Christians can be tempted to think that they can achieve good and godly ends by using the world's methods.

I know that in Bon Accord you have undertaken a very commendable church refurbishment project. And whenever we do think of works to the church there is always the pressure from outside to look to lottery funding.

and that's generally easily obtained and to have money in the bank impresses future funders. But it's simply not an option to the people of God because it's built on the proceeds of gambling to which we're opposed as a habit that wrecks the lives of the poorest in society.

[20 : 27] And so we trust and you had trusted that the Lord would provide in his own way. And hopefully you also have a vision for multiplying Bon Accord through the city of Aberdeen through church planting and if the Lord is leading you in that direction then the resources will be beyond you and you will need to rely upon God's spirit.

And in Zerubbabel's context relying on God's spirit was shown in a remarkable way. Ezra chapter 5 records an event which probably coincides with this vision.

The local governor Tatani had written to Darius the emperor questioning if the Jews had a right to build. The local it looked ominous at this point.

Might nor power would not suffice for Zerubbabel and their only option was to pray, to call upon the Lord.

And Ezra 6 tells us what happened when the people prayed. A scroll of Cyrus' original edict was found in the palace and Darius issued an edict permitting the building and preventing Tatani from further interference.

[21 : 52] God is in the business of building his church with spirit filled men and women.

He builds by his spirit. In the building of the tabernacle we're told that God filled Bezalel son of Uri with his spirit equipping him with knowledge and craftsmanship for the task.

And the great temple builder for us is the Lord Jesus Christ who is filled with the spirit without measure and he declares to us I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

Now this is where the image of the two olive trees is so hugely encouraging. See oil in the Bible is used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit and the Lord is saying that there is an ever flowing super abundant supply of God's spirit available to his church.

Zechariah is told that the olive trees from which the oil flows are those who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth. Now in its first context this refers to Joshua and Zerubbabel because in the Bible priests i.e.

[23 : 21] Joshua and kings Zerubbabel the prince were anointed but of course in the bigger picture they point towards Jesus Jesus the Messiah Messiah or Christ the anointed one.

He is filled without measure with the spirit and he is the bestower of the spirit. That flow which began at Pentecost when the spirit was first gifted to the church by the risen victorious Christ flows still to all who are in union with Christ.

It is by his power that we are brought to faith and it is in his power that we are sanctified and grow in grace. It is by his power that we testify to his cross and resurrection and it is in his spirit that the power for building the church comes.

And so that mountain of obstacles will be removed. In the power of the Holy Spirit Zerubbabel can and will complete the task.

In fact, Zerubbabel is given a glimpse of the day when the completion ceremony will at last take place in four years' time.

[24 : 53] And Zerubbabel himself will place the final stone, the top capstone amid shouts from the people, shouts which quite literally are grace, grace.

Because that is what it has all been about. This has been wrought by grace from first to last. And so we close with the exhortation and it is an exhortation implied in verse 10.

Who dares despise the day of small things? who dares despise the day of small things?

You know, some people are familiar with this text, use it as an excuse, as it were, to accept, well, there's nothing really much going on, but that's just where we are.

It's the day of small things. But that would be to misapply it. It's intended, rather, to encourage us to take the small steps and to realise that the early days are important and that the day of small things requires faith to believe that what we dare begin today will be brought to completion in the power of God.

[26 : 24] And so where does a godly life begin? Well, it begins with the first steps of obedience. Who dares despise the day of small things?

Not God, certainly. The pioneer missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, had a mountain of obstacles to overcome before he could even begin.

There was his lack of money, the difficulty of learning Mandarin, those who warned him against the xenophobic Chinese with their legendary mistrust of foreigners, his fair hair and blue eyes making him stand out.

And Taylor had no option but to move on trusting in God's power. And here a motto that chimes with this verse. A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing.

A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing. Who dares despise the day of small things? Friends, whatever God is calling you to do, whether it's a call to change certain parts of your lifestyle, whether it's a call to gospel ministry, to a commitment to study and to grow in your knowledge of the Bible, do what lies before you.

[27 : 56] Take the first steps, for if we do not despise the day of small things and act in faith, we will find that God will remove the mountains that are before us and will bring to completion that which he has begun.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the encouragements of your word. I pray that you would bless them abundantly to my brothers and sisters here in Aberdeen, that they would move forward, trusting not in might nor in power, but in your spirit.

Enable them to attempt great things for you in your strength. Grant, Lord, great encouragement as they begin to do those things which lie before them.

And grant that you will be greatly glorified in the building of your kingdom in this part of our nation, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.