

The Builders Labour in Vain

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[0 : 00] Zechariah chapter 4, and our text is found this evening in verses 6 and 7.

We may read, This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts, Who are you, O great mountain?

Before Zerubbabel shall become a plain, And shall bring forth a capstone with shouts of grace, grace to it. We want to focus on this under the obvious title, Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.

Now earlier on today, we were thinking about that amazing sermon that Peter the Apostle preached at Pentecost, the first Pentecost, after Jesus ascended back into heaven.

And we noticed how that in the power of the Spirit of God, 3,000 people were added to the church, the fledgling church in Jerusalem on that occasion.

[1 : 17] And it was down to God building the house. I thought it might be useful this evening just to look at this passage and see how that the Lord was saying that very same thing long before the Saviour came into the world.

And the principles in this passage are relevant to us today in the whole business of the growth of the church, be it a congregation or a presbytery in our case, or a denomination.

Except or unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Our title is taken, of course, from the psalm we were just singing, Psalm 127, the opening verse.

And therefore we can say that this was, as it is, a law of the kingdom of God. Back in the days of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Josedek, the remnant of the people of Israel returned from captivity.

And that was around 536 BC. And they returned at the Lord's bidding.

[2 : 38] It was prophesied of. You remember Jeremiah told the captivity would last 70 years and so on. And it was clear that God was at work in ensuring that the people would be stirred up to desire to return from the exile in Babylon and do the work that he had appointed.

And that's important, you see, because the work that they were given to carry out was his work. The task of going back to Jerusalem in particular and clearing the temple site of all the rebel and preparing to do a rebuild, it was all part of his plan.

It was a difficult task to take on. But God determined that this would be done. And the truth of the matter is, it wasn't just about building another temple.

You remember Solomon's temple had been destroyed under Sennacherib. And this was a new temple to be built. It is called in biblical history, Zerubbabel's temple.

Zerubbabel was in the direct Davidic line. He was, if you like, potentially a king.

[4 : 04] Though he was never actually called a king. He was a leader of the people. And if you look at it, you'll find in, for example, the genealogy of the saviour, that Zerubbabel is tacked in there.

So he was not only a leader of the people in going back from Babylon to Jerusalem, but he was actually of the Davidic line.

So they were sent back, they were funded, and they were sent back to do this work, to clear the site and to build a temple, the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Now, it's true that it was a material building. It was stones and so on, massive stones. But the temple had a spiritual function, and therefore the whole business was essentially a spiritual business.

And what we want to do here is to notice that when these folks went back to do this rebuild, this clearing of the site and the rebuild of the temple, they were doing it out of a spiritual motive.

[5 : 18] They were doing it for the glory of God and the extension of his kingdom through the rebuilding of the temple. And, of course, the relevant point here is that any work of God in this world

concerning the kingdom of God in this world is a spiritual work.

We have to do it by faith. We have to do it as those who need the power of God and who seek the power of God, specifically the power of the Spirit of God, in our lives to do spiritual work.

And this is because of the nature of the conflict we're involved in. We are involved in a spiritual warfare that is unseen but no less real on that account.

And it is the spiritual conflict, it is the work of the enemy opposing us that makes the work so difficult. The Savior talked, you remember, about sowing the seed, the parable of the sower, and how the seed fell on ground that was cluttered with all sorts of obstacles.

And he likened people's hearts to that. Cluttered hard, stony, shallow, or cluttered with thorns and thistles.

[6 : 54] People too involved in the world and in getting things. And it was only soil that was prepared by God that received the word and bore fruit.

It's a spiritual work and there are many obstacles put in place by the enemy of our souls. Satan's very name, Satan, is he is the opposer, he is the accuser, he's the scipperer, if I can say it, of the work of God wherever he can achieve that.

That's his business. And so the nature of the work we're involved is, it is spiritual and it is therefore an area of conflict.

We are engaged in a spiritual warfare, a battle, and the enemy is certainly committed to opposing the progress of the Lord's work.

And you see, that's precisely where these exiles returned, were at in their experience. In 536 BC, they came back in good spirits, they came back in faith and hope and expectation.

[8 : 14] They settled the land. But before very long, they were under pressure. The people who had been brought in to the land to settle it, which was the Babylonian policy, take people from all over the place and put them in all the different bits and weaken the nationalism of the people.

It was a cunning policy. But it worked. And the people who were imported into the land of Israel simply objected to the Jews coming back and thinking they could take over now and build.

No, they wanted, these incomers wanted a hand in the work and it caused problems. And there was opposition because the returned exiles didn't want them to be helping.

But then once the temple began to take a little shape, there was another problem. Do you remember what the other problem was?

The other problem was the folk who had grown old in the captivity were people who, when they were young, remembered Solomon's temple in all its splendor.

[9 : 39] And this new temple was not a patch on it. It was, we might even say, basic in comparison. In fact, we're told in the book of Ezra, you see it as nothing in your eyes.

We're told it in Haggai 2, you see it as nothing. It's no match.

The old was better and they began to complain, they began to whinge about the thing. And so what they did was they turned their attention away from the work of God to their own concerns.

You remember how Haggai, in his little prophecy, just a page or two before this, his challenge to him was, why are you concentrating on your own homes and my house is being neglected?

In other words, the work of God was being neglected. And he was raised up to stir up the people to refocus on the work of God that was given to them.

[10 : 49] And so I want us to think this evening, for a wee while, on two things. First of all, and it's in the passage, the necessity of divine enabling in the work.

This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel. And Zerubbabel represented the people, you see. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Here they are, as we've said in the introduction. For all that they had been provided for and sent back home, you remember, that no one less than Cyrus, the great king of Persia, funded the return. An amazing thing that God stirred up the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia. You find it at the end of 2 Chronicles and at the beginning of Israel.

that he stirred this man up to give an abundance of material support and the promise of help when they got back there to the land.

[12 : 07] And so the people, as we've said a moment ago, were coming back with hope, with expectation. They were on the crest of a spiritual way.

And to begin with, they worked well. But all too soon, as we've said, the resources, their inner resources, dried up and their resoluteness disappeared and the aims that they had just were not

fulfilled.

And you see, there's a principle here that is as relevant today as ever it was. These people discovered that it was not a case of more funds or more energy or more manpower or better tactics and strategy equal success.

It's got a modern ring, hasn't it? It has. If we do this and this and this and this, what we need is this and that and this. Therefore, we'll have success.

It's not like that. not by might nor by power, but by my spirit. It's an eternal and therefore relevant principle today.

[13 : 33] There may be progress through strategy. Don't get me wrong. We need to have some strategy. But when we rely on our strategies, our manpower or the preacher for that matter, we'll get into trouble sooner or later.

No. You see, the key to true success, the key to true growth, lay with the Lord himself by my spirit. and it was that reliance upon the spirit of God that was lacking. And they soon realized that their own energy and ingenuity and application didn't produce the results.

And this is as relevant as ever it was. You'll not be reading them, I'm sure, but one reads books on church growth and strategy and this and that and the next thing and the recipes for success.

My dear friends, these are short-term gains. They're not about the real and lasting. It's not about sophisticated plans.

[14 : 59] It's not about throwing more money at it. That's a political one, isn't it? Throw more money at it and make it better.

Bring more people in and it might improve. It's not as simple as that. And they found that. They found that their whole effort ground to a halt.

And they were turned to home improvements and not the work of God himself. And you see, if you think about it, in the later era, in the time of the apostles, before Pentecost, that's exactly what Peter, that's where Peter got to.

He discovered that he wasn't what he thought he was. He had denied the Savior with oath and curse. And what happened to him?

He said, I know what I can do. I'll just go home to Galilee and I'll fish. That's something I can do. He flagged in the way.

[16 : 12] He wakened in the way. He wanted to go back from commitment to the Lord in that way. And you see, God spoke to the people in Zerubbabel's day and to Zerubbabel too.

It's not by might or power, not by human ingenuity and human resources and schemes, but by my Spirit. Except the Lord builds the house with the essential power of his Holy Spirit, then there'll be no increase, there'll be no success.

Actually, Paul in 2 Corinthians 6 verse 1 says, We are workers together with God. The word is a compound, synergoy, workers together with God.

And that's the way it needs to be, by his Spirit, in reliance upon him, utterly necessary for us. And I think we need to take time and thought about the work we are part of.

And as we reflect on what more can we do, this ought to be uppermost in our thinking, by God's Spirit.

[17 : 34] It's right to feel our powerlessness. If you think about it, or some of you will be like me, when I look back to when God began to work in my heart and began to realise the claims of Christ upon me, what I didn't want, and yet what I knew was necessary.

Where did you get to? You got to the stage where you said, well, Lord, I'm not willing for this. But if I'm going to be saved, I need to be willing. I need the will to do it.

And who can give me that will? A willing people shall be made in the day of your power. That's the answer to it. God makes people willing to believe. The report, we saw that in the morning, what made the thousands of the tens of thousands who listened to the sermon different, was that they were made willing.

The Spirit of God made effective the word of the gospel to them. And in a similar way, that's what we need. We need power from God to make our witness effective.

And let's not be ashamed or afraid to ask for that power. will he not give the Holy Spirit, said Jesus, to those who ask for him.

[18 : 54] And even when we're indwelt by him through faith, we need to know more of his power in our life and witness. And that brings us to the second thing and the final thing, divine assurance to

faith of success.

divine assurance to faith of success. Verse 7, Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain, as flat as a pancake.

And he shall bring, that is, Zerubbabel shall bring forth a capstone, in other words, he'll finish the work, with shouts of grace, grace to it.

Zerubbabel and to the people in him. Doing the work on their own, through their own ingenuity and their own strength, was mission impossible.

But by faith in the God who gives strength to the weary and power to those who have no might, the impossible became gloriously possible.

[20 : 19] The mountain, the huge obstacle shall simply be flattened. some time ago we were looking at passages quite close to this in meaning.

Isaiah 41 verse 15 you remember God says to fearful Jacob, to little Israel, you shall thresh the mountains and they shall be taken away as chaff before the wind.

Again, mission impossible becomes possible through relying on the Lord. And there's an assurance to us to faith, to active living faith of success in this.

It will be done. And therefore we need to act upon the enabling offered and the promise of success given. You see the two are together not by might nor by power but by my spirit.

Rely on the spirit and the outcome will be different. Act upon the promised enabling. Experience that enabling.

[21 : 44] The enabling of the spirit of Christ. and the promise of success will be realized. In this connection in Matthew 21 and verse 21 Jesus said to the disciples if you have faith and do not doubt in your heart you will say to this mountain be cast into the sea.

And some very astute commentators have noticed that it's not just the sea as in the Mediterranean but the Dead Sea which is from Mount of Olives 4,000 feet down.

The Dead Sea is 1,000 feet a bit more than that below sea level. So Jesus is saying this high peak will be cast right down into the Dead Sea if you have faith.

Of course he's making a point he's not saying literally this will be done what he's saying is the mission impossible will become possible to faith.

If you have faith he says if you do not doubt the idea of do not doubt there is if you're not at odds in your head if you're not double minded if you're not going from foot to foot so to speak in your inner self but if you do not doubt then you will say because you're embracing the truth you're relying on the power of God the power of the spirit of God to do the work and the disciples themselves you see needed to know that and understand it and depend upon the power of the spirit of God I'm sure I've said to you before having read many a book both ancient and a bit more modern and modern too on preaching guys that have analysed the way to present a sermon and have written extensively on it will say not in an insulting way they'll say of

[24 : 17] Peter's sermon at Pentecost it wasn't really a sermon as we know it it wasn't it didn't have the structure we're familiar with but it had something that a preacher would love to have it had the power of the spirit of God in an awesome way he relied upon the spirit he saw the utter necessity of the spirit of God in him and working through him and that was the way the obstacles were removed and you see Peter clearly had this assurance in his heart when he opened his mouth and began to teach his fellow Jews who had come from all over the empire to be there for the feast of

Shavuot they were there and Peter was there and mission impossible became gloriously possible and he was sure the spirit was at work and he went on speaking to the people and multitudes came into the faith through one sermon as we saw earlier on Christ was preached people had set before them the need to turn from seeing things their own way and see them the Lord's way and see the provision that he made in his love and grace of the death of Christ as a covering for our sins a sin bearing for us and real progress was made in thousands of hearts on that occasion and you see this is what's in here this assurance of success who are you o great mountain what are you obstacles to faith before

Zerubbabel he's a man of faith you shall become a plain and he shall finish the job he shall bring forth a capstone with shouts of grace grace to it there will be a great jubilation that the house has not only been built but completed as well and if there's one thing we have to watch out for is that in our own day the enemy is sowing seeds of doubt in our minds he's busy seeking to cast us down to take away from us our conviction about the power of the spirit of God about God's capacity to

change people and communities and nations and we need to dwell on this and recapture for ourselves the reality this is not a superficial thing

I was thinking just this morning early on it was said about the 19th century awakening in Scotland it wasn't that the preachers whom God blessed greatly it wasn't that they were preaching something new and fancy something that people found intellectually stimulating or that squared with their own appetites what was said was they themselves recaptured the meaning and the power of the doctrines of the Bible set forth in the Westminster Confession that's what happened they recaptured they found they were living in their experience these very doctrines that they had preached themselves for years and suddenly they had an experience of the power of these doctrines and the difference was there and you see the enemy doesn't want that the enemy wants to pour scorn on Jesus and the word of the gospel to us he's not he doesn't want us to think seriously about committing our lives to Christ the Christ who committed himself to abandonment on the cross and to all the brutality of it but to the sufferings of his soul to for people like us that we might have life eternal the enemy doesn't want us getting all steamed up about that and telling others about that and seeking to bring them to Christ does he want that no way and so his tactic is to focus on our discouragements and I'm afraid sometimes he makes a good job of that he focuses on the difficulties hands my hands are up there on the lack of success hands up again on the problem with buildings hands up again and on looking at the losses and not the gains hands up again you see and I dare you to keep your hands down if I say put them up we're all in the same boat here maybe our visitor isn't but the rest of us are we know the discouragements we focus on the discouragement we can't see our way out through them oh lord turn our eyes upon you and to what you supply and to what you can do with the likes of us for the people around us enable us to rely upon you and the mountain shall become a plain and remember words they're relevant here to faith to him that o'er cometh

[31 : 11] God giveth a crown through faith we shall conquer though often cast down he who is our saviour our strength will renew look ever to Jesus he will carry you through who are you o great mountain before Zerubbabel the man and woman of faith you shall become a plain actually I came across an interesting quote and with this we'll bring it to a close this comes from John Calvin whose ministry was well underway about 450 years ago and John Calvin says commenting on this when we now see things in a despairing condition mark what I'm saying John

Calvin was on was coming up onto the crest of the reformation listen to him when we now see things in a despairing condition let this vision come to our minds that God is sufficiently able of his own power to help us when there is no aid from any other for his spirit will be to us for lamps for pourers for living trees so that at length experience will show us that we have been advanced in a wonderful manner by his hand alone and that's true friend adherent friend this is the way to have assurance of faith this is the way to have assurance that you really are in Christ that you've made Christ your all it's by the spirit of

God he gives us assurance he confirms to us that we're believing the word and may it be true for you in this connection too that he's confirming to you that you have albeit a trembling faith you've laid hold upon the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and his resurrection for you well may it be true for us personally and collectively and let us seek the enabling of the Holy Spirit all the more in the work of Christ's kingdom and the one thing I want to finish with is something that I've been brought back to again and again often I've nearly been dragged back to it comes from Psalm 27 and verses 13 and 14 I had utterly lost heart unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living wait upon the

Lord and he shall strengthen thine heart wait I say upon the Lord this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel not by might nor by power but by my spirit says the Lord of hosts then who are you O great mountain before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain and he shall bring forth a capstone with shouts of grace grace to it may he bless to us his own word and encourage us in him Amen