

God's Work

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[0 : 0 0] And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, What do you see?

I said, I see and behold a lampstand all of gold with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it.

And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other is on the left. And I said to the angel who talked with me, What are these, my lord?

Then the angel who talked with me answered and said, Do you not know what these are? I said, No, my lord. Then he said to me, 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? You shall become a plain, and he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of grace, grace to it.

[1 : 0 3] And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of his house. His hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.

For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. These seven are the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth.

Then I said to him, What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? And the second time I answered and said to him, What are these two branches of the olive trees which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out?

And he said to me, Do you not know what these are? I said, No, my lord. Then he said, These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.

And the word of the Lord came to me, Take from the exiles Heldiah, Tobijah, and Jediah, who have arrived from Babylon, and go to the same day to the house of Josiah, the son of Zephaniah.

[2 : 1 1] Take from them silver and gold, and make a crown, and set it on the head of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. And say to him, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold the man whose name is the branch, for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.

It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord, and shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the council of peace shall be between them both.

And the crown shall be in the temple of the Lord, as a reminder to Helm, Tobijah, Jediah, and Hen, the son of Zephaniah. And those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the Lord.

And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And this shall come to pass. You will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God. He, Jesus, put another parable before them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

[3 : 32] He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened.

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables. Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. Well, I have to say at the beginning that we've been doing a series from Zechariah at our church, and I've been listening to Simon, your minister, and may I commend a very excellent series on the St. Helens website.

And if this doesn't make sense to you, do go there. I'm building on his shoulders. And there's some very excellent talks to be enjoyed there. We live in an age which values spirituality but regards biblical Christianity as an irrelevant and even a dangerous thing, and building on God's church through making Jesus known is a very slow and discouraging work these days.

Inevitably, we ask, is it worth it to sacrifice precious time and energy in trying to gather people around an open Bible in order to see Jesus there? And whether it's worth trying to build the church when progress is so slow and the church remains so small and insignificant and weak, why not give up the struggle and join everybody else at the shops or the sports clubs or just stay in bed with a good book or a newspaper or a boxed set?

Well, this morning, it may surprise us to find the answer in Zechariah chapter 3, chapter 4, because God's people had not listened to him in this situation that Zechariah was in, and he had sent them into exile in Babylon in 587 BC, just as he said that he would.

[5 : 27] And they'd been there for some 70 years through most of the lifetime of Daniel and his friends. Now, Cyrus had taken over the empire and sent back 50,000 Jews to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple of the Lord.

And the rebuilding work had started, but it was slow, and there was much opposition. And it didn't look as if God's promises about Jerusalem and the temple would be kept.

It didn't look as if it was worth working for the Lord in Zechariah's day. So God sent them, Zechariah and Haggai, to encourage them and to encourage us, because 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 10 and 12 tell us that these prophecies, indeed all prophecies, are for our benefit, who live after Jesus has come, even more than for the benefit of those in Zechariah's day before Jesus came.

That's the encouragement, isn't it, for us? And Zechariah's message is summed up in chapter 1 and verse 3. The Lord says through Zechariah, Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord.

Because only those who come back and keep coming back to the Lord are able to do the Lord's work. Now, chapter 3 has just summarized the gospel for us, and it's telling us how it is possible for filthy people like me to come back to the Lord, because that in itself is a problem.

[7 : 07] And chapter 3 was presenting Joshua, the high priest, who is the representative of God's people, as being somebody who is filthy, dressed in filthy clothes.

And the illustration that my colleague preached from this chapter was his family's dog. When it went out for a walk, it would roll in the fox poo, or the cow dung and things, and would come back.

And his mother, or mother-in-law it was, would say, That dog's not coming into this house until every single microgram of that horrible stuff has been washed off.

And that is a picture of what we're like in God's sight. And it's only when the high priest, when we have our filthy clothes taken off and replaced by the spotless clothes of God's righteousness, that we're acceptable in God's sight.

But once we are, we have work to do. And that is what chapters 4 to 6 are about, the chapters that we're in here, chapter 4. And they're reminding us that now that he has made us clean, there is worthwhile and lasting work to be done.

[8 : 22] And you'll see that the main points that the Lord is making here, I think, are on the sheet. See if you agree, on the notice sheet. So do follow as we go through. I'm afraid there's four rather than three, so bear with me.

But the first one is that God works to bring light to his world. And if you look at verse 2, the picture here in chapter 4 is of this lampstand. Let's just read it.

See, the angel has woken up Zechariah to show him this picture of a lampstand in verse 2. All of gold with a bowl on the top of it and seven lamps on it with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it.

So picture this huge, great big lamp with an enormous reservoir of oil around it, feeding the lamps. And each of the, there's seven lamps around this sort of circle of oil.

And in each of the seven lamps, there seems to be seven wicks. So it looks as if there are 49 wicks of light. And that light would have penetrated the darkness around it and showered it with bright light.

[9 : 35] I think of a candelabra with 49 candles. And you get the idea, sparkling, beautiful light being diffracted all over the place. But what is it, this lampstand?

Well, in the tabernacle, there was one lampstand. And in the temple of Solomon, there were 10. So it looks like this lampstand is a symbol of the temple, which was being rebuilt in Zechariah's day.

And the building represented the dwelling of God with his people, the place where the light of God's mercy and love and wisdom and authority shone forth.

And, of course, the temple represents a picture of God's church today because the Lord showed the apostle John, imprisoned on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

I'm sure some of us will have been holidays there. A vision of the Son of Man walking amongst seven lampstands, which we are told explicitly are the seven churches, all the churches, the full number of God's people, because seven is the complete number.

[10 : 45] So Zechariah saw that God was keeping his promise by building the temple in his day, and he would keep his promise by building his church in ours.

And he will keep his promise and build the new Jerusalem, where he will live with his peoples, and where they will see the Son of Man, the mighty champion king face to face.

Meanwhile, we are to be the people who bring the light of the Lord into the darkness of the world around us.

So Grace Church Dulwich is here to bring the light of the Lord into Dulwich and the places where we live. And Zechariah's already told us how it's going to happen.

It's as we come back to him, chapter 1, verse 3. Because, of course, we haven't got any light of our own. We're rather like the moon, in the sense that we only have reflected light.

[11 : 47] The moon, obviously, is reflecting the light of the sun. Everybody knows that in a well-educated congregation like this one. And that's a picture of us. That's you and I. We haven't got our own light, but we can reflect God's light and must do so.

And the importance of that was brought home to me on a walk with my wife, Denise, soon after we married. It nearly ended the marriage. We had a lovely walk from Lee Abbey to Linton, a little town in Exmoor. And a lovely sunny day, walking on the coastal path, big precipice on one side, lovely sea view.

Beautiful walk. On the way back, it was a moonless night, and it was totally pitch black. It was totally without any light at all. And what had been a lovely walk, it became dangerous and difficult, and nearly ended our marriage.

That's the difference that light makes, even if it's reflected light. So it is for us, as God's people, to come back to him in order to walk in the glorious light of his love and kindness and mercy and wisdom, and to reflect something of his light into the darkness of this world.

As we love our enemies, as we show self-control in a world that's out of control, live as people of truth in a world of lies, live as people who forgive one another in a world of vengeance, live as people of hope in a hopeless world, live as people who are kind in a world that is harsh, live as people who have eternal life, in a world that's dying.

[13 : 23] And the only way that happens, that we keep coming back to the Lord, is that we have the Lord's Spirit at work in us. And so, Zachariah saw that it is the Lord's work that is done by the Lord's Spirit's enabling.

We naturally think, don't we, that the way to get things done is by external pressure, possibly of the law or other forms of compulsion or material reward.

But the Lord's way is by the gentle internal work of his Spirit in the hearts of his children. Next, the angel showed Zachariah two olive trees. So, he got this big lampstand, and he got two olive trees on either side.

And, these olive trees are feeding the lamp with oil, abundant, steady stream of oil. And we see from verse 6 that this is a picture of God's Spirit.

Then he said to me, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. The task of the builders in Zachariah's day was enormous.

[14 : 35] Look at verse 7. Who are you, great mountain before Zerubbabel? You shall become a plain. The great mountain that's in verse 7 seems to be the enormous pile of difficulty standing in the way of the building, the rebuilding of the temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem because the city had literally become a mountain of rubble since its destruction in 587.

A mountain that had to be cleared before the reconstruction work could even begin. And building the church today is similar to that.

There's a mountain of misunderstandings that have to be cleared away from the minds and the thoughts of our friends before they can even begin to see who Jesus is and what he has done.

For our friends to come to life by coming to Jesus, it's as unlikely as the dead being raised. and that is exactly what has to happen when somebody becomes a Christian.

And it's not something we can do. It's not something we should try to do to give life to the dead. Some religions do try to do that by force, by the sword.

[15 : 52] It's not the Lord's way. Some religions try to hold on to their followers by threats of being outcast or even killed if you dare to lose or turn away from that faith.

But that's not the Lord's way. He works by his gentle spirit who gives us his word about his son that everyone and anyone may see him and come to know him and understand his love and begin to trust him as one by one we discover him for ourselves and we see how trustworthy, how wise, how true he is and we freely choose to submit our lives to him gratefully and joyfully without any compulsion.

You see, our work as God's people, the builders of God's church under the Lord's hand is to pray for our friends to encourage them to open the scriptures that the Holy Spirit may show them the Lord Jesus there and to pray for them that he will do so so that gently but surely people will come to life with him and be built around him into a community of love and truth.

Now, because this is God's work, it doesn't always happen as frequently or as fast as we would wish it did and we can get very discouraged and we need to remember that God's work often starts small and frequently looks weak as we see on the third point of the notice sheet.

It seems so in Zechariah's day, verse 9, the foundation of the temple had been laid but it didn't look like much. Just a glance at verse 9.

[17 : 50] The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house and his hands will complete it. If you see a building with its foundations laid, there's not much to look at and they got to that stage and were getting discouraged and so the Lord then went on to say in verse 10, for whoever despises the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel the king.

This building will be constructed this job will be done. And it often seems as if the Lord's work is going very slowly, much more slowly than we would wish it were.

And that is often the way with God's work. Zechariah's day, the laying of the foundation was a big step forwards, much bigger than they had realized because actually once the foundations are there, the rest begins to happen quite quickly.

And in our day, the regular reading and preaching of God's word is building his kingdom. Verse 10 is one of several references to the eyes of the Lord.

Rather strange reference, isn't it, there in the end of verse 10. Let's just find it. The seven are the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth.

[19 : 10] Now, what are the eyes of the Lord? It seems from Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 12 that this is a reference to God watching over his word.

Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 12 says, I am watching over my word to perform it. Or in the NIV translation, I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.

and that is how God's work is progressed. Many years later, Jesus told the parable, you'll remember, of the sower and he says explicitly that the seed is the word of God and it is the word of God that builds his church.

It may not happen quickly. He goes on to tell the parable that we had read recently just before this one of the mustard seed and the mustard seed is again a picture of God's word and it's a tiny little thing and yet out of that tiny little thing comes this garden shrub which is the biggest in the garden and it gives shelter to the birds.

Tiny little thing which you could blow away just with a puff of wind but from that comes this big shrub God's word tiny seemingly weak ineffective powerless that's what our friends and our neighbors would say isn't it why do you bother looking at a book that's written 2000 years ago and about a culture 2000 miles away what do you do that for what a stupid thing to do but it's from the word of God that the church of God is built not in our time but in his time slowly yet surely it's often that great works of God have small and insignificant beginnings it looks as if perhaps nothing is happening at all sometimes for even decades take the life of Jesus as one example of that you'd imagine if God was going to fulfill his promises to Abraham to build a people who'd live with him in a restored paradise

[21 : 28] Eden made perfect forever and if he was going to do it by coming in person you would think surely that that person would raise an army and conquer the world not die on a cross in weakness and humiliation but that's how God did it and his ways are not often ours it means that we should not despair if we don't see huge and fast progress if the numbers of friends becoming Christians are small if we've been praying for a friend or a member of the family for a long time and it seems that nothing is happening if we're struggling to find people to teach the children and to pass on the great news of the great king to them if we're regarded as being a nuisance in the local community and sometimes by the church authorities if we're regarded as being slightly awed by our friends and even our neighbors if we feel out of step with the majority of the people around us putting so much time and energy and money into this work don't be discouraged that's often the way that God does his work and of course it is work that revolves around his son as we see in the last of these points

God's work depends on his son towards towards the end of the vision Zachariah is asked by the angel or Zachariah asks the angel what are these two olive trees and the two olive branches that pour out the golden oil that keeps the lampstand shining out its glorious light then verses 11 and 12 let's just read them then I said to him what are these two olive trees on the right and on the left and the second time I asked him and said to him what are these two branches of the olive trees that are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out and he said to me rather comfortingly do you not know what these are and I said no my lord because that's exactly what we think what on earth is this all about and so the angel gives him a clue in verse 14 then he said I'll give you a clue no he doesn't then he said verse 14 these are the two anointed ones who stand by the lord of the whole earth so the clue is it's something to do with the anointed ones and the anointed ones in the scriptures are those who are given specific tasks usually kings and priests sometimes prophets and the king at

Zachariah's day was Zerubbabel and the priest was Joshua so it seems that he's talking about the king Zerubbabel and the priest Joshua and wonderfully at the end of Zachariah's vision that night Zachariah sees that both roles will be fulfilled not by two people but by the same person let's just read chapter six and verses eleven to thirteen take take from them the silver and the gold and make a crown and set it on the head we'd expect of the king Zerubbabel but no it's not the king it's the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest so what's going on there and say to him thus says the lord of hosts behold the man whose name is the branch for he shall branch from his place and he shall build the temple of the lord it is he who shall build the temple of the lord and shall bear royal honor and shall sit and rule on his throne

Zachariah is told to make this crown of silver and gold and to put it not as we'd expect on the head of the king but on the head of the priest who will then sit on one person who is both priest and king will enable the spirit of god to give life and light to the people of god the one who would say 400 years later i am the light of the world whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life all who come to him receive his light live by his light and shed his light into the darkness of his world and it's only as we come to trust what he has done for us on the cross that our filthy hearts are made clean and able to receive his holy spirit and to be built into the community of people who know him and are able to come back to him filthy as we are day after day to be made clean and to be re-equipped to do his work you see it might be slow work it often is it frequently seems insignificant but

God is reassuring us it's his work it will last it's infinitely worth doing so may I ask as we end do you organize your work and priorities around his work or do you expect his work to be organized around your work and your priorities it's a good question isn't it because from this the work that matters is the work that lasts and it makes sense to organize our work I'm not saying give up the day job it's very important that we go out and earn the money and support the gospel work and other things but is our priority in the day job in the nine to five Monday to Friday or probably it's more like six till eight isn't it for many of us here all that hard work that we're doing out in the workplace it's still possible to make his work our priority there because this is the work that lasts that lasts and it's done by coming back to him day by day and claiming his promise that he comes back to us and enables us to do his work let's pray that'll happen then what how