

Zechariah 4 – Littlebourne 6th October 2024 -PH

Then the angel who talked with me returned and woke me up, like someone awakened from sleep. ² He asked me, 'What do you see?' I answered, 'I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps. ³ Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.' ⁴ I asked the angel who talked with me, 'What are these, my lord?' ⁵ He answered, 'Do you not know what these are?' 'No, my lord,' I replied. ⁶ So 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 Almighty. ⁷ 'What are you, mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of "God bless it! God bless it!"' ⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁹ 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. ¹⁰ 'Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone (or plumbline) in the hand of Zerubbabel?' ¹¹ Then I asked the angel, 'What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?' ¹² Again I asked him, 'What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?' ¹³ He replied, 'Do you not know what these are?' 'No, my lord,' I said. ¹⁴ So he said, 'These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth.'

Last week Jonathan explained how our human minds assume that there are times when God approves of what we are doing and times when he doesn't because we fall into sin. Our human minds seek to please God and yet we know that we will displease him from time to time and that gives us guilty feelings for falling short. The ups and down in the history of the Israelites are a result of times of blessing for obedience and times of curses for disobedience. This pattern is mirrored in our own lives. The Israelites needed the priesthood to absolve their sins, and the priests had to clean themselves bodily and wear their special clothing to perform the tasks needed to get God's forgiveness for themselves and for the people. Always God would pull Israel as a burning brand from the fire after disasters struck them because of their disobedience. Israel would not be destroyed nor would God leave mankind without a witness of himself. God's promises to Israel are eternal and no matter how far they move away from God, he will never forsake them. Jesus will never forsake us. As Christians, none of us can earn our salvation with mere obedience, good works and trying to be good... everyone will fail at some point, if not many points. Without Jesus, we would be having to make sacrifices for sinful acts on a regular basis and the priesthood would be extremely busy...as it was in the days of Jesus, with a stream of people coming daily to the Temple, and a flood of people on feast days like Passover. We by the grace of the Lord Jesus can be clothed in his righteousness and by faith in Jesus we are saved.

This is Zechariah's fifth vision, and he needs to be awakened in order to see the angel speaking to him and see what is before him. We don't know how soon this is after the fourth vision.

He asked me, 'What do you see?' I answered, 'I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lamps on it, with seven channels to the lamps. ³ Also there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.'

The traditional Jewish menorah has seven lamps, with a central one, and three on each side, each having a branch from the central column. There is a depiction of one stolen from the Temple on Titus' victory arch, which is about six foot tall with a large base. This lampstand doesn't quite fit the description of a menorah, as it has a bowl at the top with seven channels or pipes running to seven lamps, feeding them with oil, so that it is replenished from a central reservoir without each lamp needing to be filled with oil. Pictures that artists have made show the olive trees either side with their branches dropping olives into the central bowl. A picture of seven lamps is given in Revelation 4:5 *From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.* Or the sevenfold spirit of God. Seven is the perfect number and represents

completion as on the seventh day God rested. We are still in the seventh day after the six days of creation. Zechariah sees this picture but doesn't know what it means. ⁴ *I asked the angel who talked with me, 'What are these, my lord?' ⁵ He answered, 'Do you not know what these are?' 'No, my lord,' I replied.* The angel seems to expect Zechariah to know what this lampstand with seven lamps and the two olive trees are supposed to be. He then gives an answer which seems to have very little to do with the lampstand and two olive trees!

⁶ *So 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 Almighty.*

In chapter three, Joshua the high priest was given clean clothes and a promise of blessing. Now in chapter four we meet Zerubbabel, the grandson of Judah's penultimate king, Jeconiah who was taken captive to Babylon and lived in the royal court there. Zerubbabel was trusted enough to be made governor of Judea by Darius and led the temple rebuilding project. Effectively he was the secular ruler of Judea while Joshua was its spiritual leader. The well-known phrase appears - *"not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit",* says the Lord Almighty. Human actions, human endeavours, human works accomplish nothing of importance unless they are done in line with the spirit of God. What Zerubbabel was going to achieve would happen because God was behind the project.

The next verse speaks of the difficulties that would be faced and how they would melt away. ⁷ *'What are you, mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of "God bless it! God bless it!"* We know from Ezra and Haggai as well as Zechariah, that there were people wanting to concentrate on rebuilding their own houses, regaining their lands, trading and getting wealth for themselves instead of addressing the reason they were allowed by king Darius to return to Judea – which was to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The obstacles faced earlier when the work stopped for over a dozen years at the foundations would disappear, and it only took another four years before the temple was reconsecrated. Then the capstone, the stone that completes the work would be laid to shouts of blessing. ⁸ *Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁹ 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.* The angel is able to encourage Zechariah by proclaiming that the work will be completed, and that the people will know that he is a true prophet because what he says will happen, will have happened. Just as today people can be sceptical about anyone claiming to be a prophet, they were no less sceptical 2,500 years ago. There would be plenty of people in Jerusalem who saw the work having been halted who would be suspicious of the timeline and sceptical of Zerubbabel's ability to finish the work. God is able to do things at a pace that will astonish people... the change in society as a result of Whitefield's and Wesley's mission was truly amazing and prevented Britain from going the same godless way as France did at the end of the eighteenth century. Thousands of chapels were built, Sunday schools built, magnificent churches were built – but today many are closed, being converted into housing, demolished and worst of all being used as mosques. A picture of how society in Britain has had a time of blessing and is now in time that seems to be of curses as the good news is rejected and despised by so many. But we know that God will accomplish whatever he says he will do, and we can be encouraged that the good news will remain good news for all who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Then the angel continues

¹⁰ *'Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone (or plumbline) in the hand of Zerubbabel?' The "who dares despise the day of small things" has also been used a lot recently to encourage people to be content with small things that happen rather than be disappointed that the big things don't happen. We never know what small seeds are sown in the minds of those we meet, those to whom we give a tract or a bible, those we help and those we encourage. God will be doing his work even though our own actions*

may seem very small and unimportant. But in this passage, the day of small things is going to be over soon and there is going to be rejoicing on the day the temple capstones are put in place. The majority of the work will be done soon, and it will need the final touches. Others would interpret this as being a warning to those who have been complaining about the small things happening – such as those who complained that the temple building work had ground to a halt and only the foundations were in – to acknowledge that unseen by the world, but seen by God, great things are coming to completion with much rejoicing. For Zechariah it was a repeat of the promise that Zerubbabel would complete the work (already promised in verse 9. There would be rejoicing in the heavenly realms as well as on earth. Naturally the exiles scattered over the middle east would rejoice on hearing that the temple was rebuilt. Yet Zechariah had not had an answer as to what the lamp really meant, let alone what the two olive trees meant, supplying oil to the lamps perhaps. We sort of get an answer about the seven lamps – they may symbolise the eyes of the Lord that roam across the earth, or the seven spirits of the Lord mentioned in Revelation 4:5. ¹¹ Then I asked the angel, 'What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?' ¹² Again I asked him, 'What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?' ¹³ He replied, 'Do you not know what these are?' 'No, my lord,' I said. ¹⁴ So he said, 'These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth.' As we saw last week, there are now branches as well as trees, and the branches are beside two gold pipes that pour out oil... the pipes weren't mentioned earlier. Again, the angel expects Zechariah to know the answers to his own questions, and only gets vague replies which seem detached from the questions. The angel tells Zechariah that there two who serve the whole earth. Moses and Elijah were with Jesus at the Transfiguration and are the likely characters in this vision. Joshua and Zerubbabel might be the two olive trees, as they were anointed to get the temple rebuilt and to get the people to turn back to God wholeheartedly.

To sum up: (1) **God's work is achieved by God's strength.** That doesn't mean we can sit by idly and expect God to do everything. It means that co-operating with Holy Spirit, the work that is needed gets done. God makes the impossible possible, he changes circumstances so that things can happen. King Darius was a pagan warrior king, yet God put it in his mind to allow the temple to be rebuilt, some 50,000 exiles to go home, and appoint as governor of the kingdom which held out against Assyria and Babylon, Zerubbabel, the grandson of its former king of Judah.

(2) **The danger of despising small beginnings.** The days of Israel's greatness had passed with Solomon, when wealth flowed into the nation enabling great buildings – palaces and the temple – to be built and be encrusted with gold everywhere. Now Jerusalem was a ruin and people wanted to get on with rebuilding their own houses and farms and not much work was done on the temple. Regardless of these small beginnings, there would be great rejoicing when the work was finished. Likewise whatever small things we may do, may in time bear fruit and end up with great things happening.

(3) **People matter more than institutions.** The temple was the home of the lampstand – the light of the world and God's window on the world. The two olive trees – Joshua and Zerubbabel - the two olive trees that supplied to oil to keep the lamps burning brightly. The temple without the lamp would just be a building, and the lamp without oil just an ornament. Men were needed to provide the oil and to keep the lamps alight. Today the church is and always has been the people, the worshippers who keep the flame alight. Jesus is the light of the world and we his servants are fuel that keeps the light burning in the darkness, spreading the good news, faithfully witnessing and worshipping the true God of the universe.