

Not By Might

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[0 : 0 0] Have you ever felt small as a Christian? Not in terms of physical height, but in terms of feeling outnumbered in the world, or your work for God just seems to be feeble or ineffective. For me, a classic example was when I first met Michelle's uncle. It was the first time I'd ever met him, and I was studying at Bible College at the time, and so he was curious about how Michelle and I, who were married, were surviving without a job.

And so I was answering his questions as best as I could, and then I thought I'd try and strike up a conversation about God with him, because I knew he didn't believe. And so I asked him, have you ever thought about Jesus? To which he replied, oh, I need to go to the bathroom, and walked out of the room. And for the rest of the day, he avoided me. If I walked towards him, he'd move away. And so at one point I was a bit cheeky and used that to my advantage. He was sitting next to Michelle. I wanted to sit next to Michelle, so I walked towards him, and he walked away, and I got to sit next to Michelle.

Have you ever tried to do something for God only to be frustrated? You're serving at church, and suddenly you get sick, or you've practiced the Bible reading, and the minister changes it on you at the last minute. It's never happened here, of course.

you're serving at church. Or you invite your friends to an event, and they make excuses when you know they could have come. Or you do have family members who don't believe, and they do come to a Christmas service or an Easter service, but yet nothing seems to have clicked for them. And so our efforts to build God's kingdom seem so ineffective. Or perhaps you've wondered how Christianity, how God's kingdom can possibly grow when there is so much opposition to it in the world. Church attendance numbers seem to be dropping, and the government has changed the laws about CRE so that classes have been cancelled across the state. Now, there are some moves to change things, I understand, but the reality is at the schools I teach, classes have been cancelled. So my daughter's school, CRE is now offered in prep and grade one, grade two to six, no more. The school I teach at, it's offered in grade one and two, but prep, three, four, five, six, cancelled. Or more seriously, as we mentioned before, you look at Iraq, where

Christians are fleeing for their lives, and sometimes not making it in time, being killed instead. And so we can feel overwhelmed, and we can feel God's kingdom seem small compared to the world around us. Well, back in the land of Judah, in the south of Israel, this is how the people seemed to be feeling at the time. They returned back from exile, but in the words of Zechariah, they felt like it was a day of small things. A day when they felt small on the world scale. A day when God's kingdom felt small and insignificant. A day when doing God's work of building his temple seemed ineffective and feeble. And so God gives them a word of hope in this next vision of chapter four.

[3 : 2 7] And in fact, it's because of this vision that I've called our series, Hope in a Day of Small Things, which is really what the whole book is about. It's about God giving his people hope that his kingdom will come despite appearances. And so it has something to say to us, I think, when we feel overwhelmed by the world and God's kingdom feels small. So let's have a look at the vision, point one, verse one.

The angel of the Lord who talked with me returned and woke me up like someone awakened from sleep. Now, remember, Zechariah is there and he has this angel who is like his tour guide.

And he's showing Zechariah a series of visions. And it seems as though Zechariah has dozed off briefly, or perhaps he was deep in thought about last week's vision. Do you remember last week Joshua was given clean clothes, which represent forgiveness of sins. And in Christ, we all can receive clean clothes or forgiveness of sins. Now, perhaps he's deep in thought about that. And the angel wakes him from that thought. Whatever the case, this angel, his tour guide, wakes him up because he has another important vision to show Zechariah. And so verse two, 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 or lips to the lamps. Also, there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left. In fact, there's actually more to this vision that comes towards the end. So if you just scan to the end of the passage to verse 11 and 12, we read top of the page, actually verse 11 and 12.

He said, what are these two olive branches? Sorry, I then asked the angel, what are these two olive trees on the right and left of the lampstand? And again, I asked him, what are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes? So that's new gold pipes that pour out golden oil, which is also new. And so we have this image of a lampstand and lights and olive trees and golden pipes and golden oil. Now, it's a bit hard to picture what Zechariah sees. And so some people have come up with what they think he saw. So on the next slide is a picture of a lampstand and olive trees beside it. Now, the lamp there looks a lot like the lamp that was in the temple of that day, which makes sense because we're in the context of building the temple. But what Zechariah sees is probably more like the next slide. The lights are actually on top of the bowl. There's a bowl at the top and in the bowl is oil. And the oil seeps towards the lamps and there's little kind of lips or pits or channels. And so the oil can always keep the light burning, to keep the light shining. And then either side, have you got the olive trees with the golden pipes pouring out the oil. And so the image is of this never ceasing light, if you like. Now, I'll leave that picture up there for you. But what do these things represent? Well, this is exactly what Zechariah asks in verse 4. See, verse 4, he says, I asked the angel of the Lord who talked with me, what are these, my Lord? He answered, do you not know what these are? No, my Lord, I replied.

[6 : 55] Now, the angel's response there is a little odd, isn't it? I mean, if Zechariah knew what they were, he wouldn't have asked, would he? And so it's a little odd. And I suspect what the angel is doing and what he's about to do is saying, well, hang on a second. Don't worry about what each part represents.

Hear the overall message, because that's the important part. In fact, that's what the angel then tells him, the message. So we're at point 2, verse 6. So the angel 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. 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.

You see, Zechariah is given a word or a message of the Lord to preach. This time he is to preach it to Zerubbabel. But the question is, who is Zerubbabel? I mean, it's a pretty unique name.

Well, he was the governor of Judah. He was a descendant of King David, and he was responsible for building the temple. And the message for him was that he will build the temple, but it won't be by his might. It will be by God's spirit. In other words, God promises to rebuild the temple through his servant, Zerubbabel. And every mountain, that is every obstacle in Zerubbabel's way, God will level for him. So that Zerubbabel will finish the temple. And he will place the capstone, the last stone of the temple, amongst shouts of joy from the people. And my son, Tim, is in grade four at the moment, and he's just been given a school project to do. And the school project is to build a model boat. This is not out of cardboard. This is a proper boat that has to float.

It also has to have a motor and a propeller and be able to go along. Grade four. I did echidnas and platypuses in grade four. And so it might sound like fun, but he has to design it himself. He's not given any plans and then build it himself. And when he sat down to do it, it was all a bit overwhelming. And so I said to him, don't worry, I will help you. I checked, by the way, that I was allowed to help. I am. The problem is I don't know how to build model boats either.

[9 : 27] But we'll get there. We'll get there. But the point is, Tim does not have to rely on his own might to do this big task. He's not alone. I will somehow help him. And this is what God is saying to Zerubbabel. Don't rely on your own might. You're not alone. By my spirit, I will make sure this temple is built through you. It would have been a great message of comfort and hope for Zerubbabel, particularly in the face of the opposition he was receiving from the north, if you remember that.

But this message is not just for Zerubbabel, the governor. It was also for the people too, who felt discouraged and outnumbered, who felt like it was a day of small things. And so God continues in verse 8, this time with a message for Zechariah to preach to the people. So verse 8, then the word of the Lord came to me, Zechariah. The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple. His hands will also complete it. And then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me, Zechariah, to you people. Who dares despise the day of small things? Since the seven eyes of the Lord that reigns throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel. Now verse 10 here in this edition of the NIV is a little unusual. Other translations, I think, have it better. So on the next slide, I think is a better translation of verse 10.

It's not God who rejoices, it's the people. And so it says, whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the chosen stone in the hand of Zerubbabel. And then he goes on to say, these seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the whole earth. You see, the people who had returned from exile to God's kingdom, returned to a land that was, well, it was a shadow of its former glory. And the promise of a rebuilt temple and God's return felt like a long way off, especially given the opposition of the unbelieving world around them. But the message to these people is not to despise a day of small things. They may feel small, God's kingdom may look small, but God promises that Zerubbabel will finish the temple and they will rejoice. Indeed, God, by his spirit will ensure this happens. But the question then is, okay, if that's the message that God will make sure it happens by his spirit, not by their mind, if that's the message, what are all these things represent in the vision? Well, the angel tells Zechariah what the seven lights mean at the end of verse 10 on the screen there. So then in verse 10, it says, these seven, which I take it out of the seven lights are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth. In other words, it seems that the lights represent God's all seeing or all knowing power. And by implication, the fact that he rules over all, in other words, his eyes survey the whole earth, which is his. And so I take it, that's what the lights represent. And the lampstand, which the lights are on probably represents the temple that is being built at the temple where God promised to dwell at the temple where God surveys the whole earth from. But what about these olive trees then? Well, verse 11, then I asked the Zechariah asked the angel, what are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? Again, I asked him, what are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil? He replied, do you not know what these are? No, my Lord, I said. So he said, these are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth. And so we are told that the two olive trees represent God's two anointed servants who are commissioned by him to do his work. So who are they? Well, people are divided, but after some thinking and research, I think they represent Zerubbabel, the governor or king, and Joshua, the high priest who we saw last week. These are the two who serve God and serve the people. And the oil that runs through the branches and the golden pipes into the bowl that keeps the temple going and the light burning, I think represents God's spirit, God's spirit who has anointed them and works through them to build the temple where God will continue to dwell and rule from. Now, there are other various interpretations, but in the end, it doesn't matter. What does matter, what is clear is the message.

The message is the temple will be rebuilt through God's anointed servants, but it won't be by their might. It will be by God and his spirit. And so the people are to trust in God.

Even in these days of seemingly small things, they are to rely on God for help in doing his work of building his temple. And let me say the temple was rebuilt four years later in 516 BC, but even then it was small in grandeur compared to what it used to be. In fact, it was small compared to what the prophets said it would be. And Zerubbabel, who was a descendant from King David, who was one of God's anointed servants who could have been the Messiah, well, he turns out not to be the Messiah that is God's chosen king. And so for many Jews, it wasn't just those days that felt small. It was all the years after the exile that felt small. It felt like one long day of small things. But the fact that God did keep his promise to rebuild the temple through Zerubbabel, even despite opposition, shows that he was and is at work. And the fact that the temple was small in grandeur forced people to look forward to a time when it would be glorious. And that time came in part in Jesus, the anointed servant.

[15 : 44] Do you remember what happens at Jesus' baptism? Jesus is baptized and a dove descends on him, which represents the spirit. It's his anointing, if you like, or commissioning to do God's work, his work of dying on a cross so that we could be forgiven and we could be built into God's family, built into God's church, or as the New Testament puts it, built into God's temple.

You see, in the New Testament, the church replaces the temple through Jesus. We are joined with Jesus and we become the temple. And God builds this temple, his church, through his servant Jesus.

Through his death on the cross, we can be forgiven and come in to God's church, God's temple, God's kingdom. Yet it's not just Jesus through whom God builds his church.

Jesus gives us the same job, does he not? At the end of Matthew chapter 28, he says, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and what?

This make disciples. Yeah. Go and make disciples. Go and build my church, build my kingdom. But notice at the end of that, he says, and surely I am with you always, not by your might, but by my spirit.

[17 : 08] You see, we're not alone. Jesus is with us and indeed gives us his spirit to enable us to do his work, to build his church. And so we are to do this relying not on our own might, but on God's spirit, prayerfully trusting in God that he will build his church.

You see, even today, we may feel as Christians overwhelmed by the world around us. Christians in Iraq, as I said, are forced to flee. Church numbers decrease. CRE lessons decrease.

In Australia, those decrease while Islam increases. I wrote to the minister for education and, you know, it didn't seem to get all that far. And so our work seems to be ineffective.

You invite people to church and they don't want to come or they do come and nothing seems to gel or click. And if you do have an opportunity to talk about Jesus with someone, your heart pounds and then you say something.

Can you walk away thinking, oh, I said the wrong thing? Or, like my uncle, they just have to go to the bathroom and walk off. And so we can feel overwhelmed by the world around us, outnumbered.

[18 : 25] We can feel like our work is ineffective. We can feel like God's kingdom seems insignificant and unimpressive. But the message for us is the same as it was for the people of Zechariah's day.

God will build his temple, the church. But it won't be by our might nor our clever conversations. It will be by his spirit. And I've seen it happen. I don't know.

I don't think I've told you this story before. But there was a man who became a Christian during a church service at one of my old churches. It was before I was a minister. And I can remember that the sermon that day, I'm not trying to be mean, but it wasn't a great sermon.

And now, look, I've become a pastor and I know we all have our bad days. And if you've suffered because of one of my bad days, I apologize now. But this was a really bad day for this minister.

He took one verse and he kind of sprang board. He talked about Jesus, which was great, but it was really hard to follow. I didn't know where he was going. Other people found it the same.

[19 : 29] I found out afterwards. But at the end of his sermon, after he prayed, there was a man who stood up in front of everyone and exclaimed, what you've said this morning has really touched my heart and I want to follow Jesus from this day on.

I kid you not. And you know what my first thought was? How did this happen from that sermon? The answer?

Not by might, but by God's spirit. It's happened here. I've known people who have become Christians during our church services. Not because of our preaching, but because of God's spirit.

You see, God will ensure his church is built. He will send his spirit to make sure it happens so that his word will never return to him empty, as Isaiah says. In fact, he will help us with words to say.

So on the next slide, this is what Jesus says. Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 33] One of the men in my Bible study group rang up the Christian radio station to donate some money or something or other. And they said, oh, look, can you say a few things on air for us?

And before he could answer, they said, okay, you ready? Go, click. And so he said something. And then after the radio person played the next song, she spoke to him and said, oh, look, what you had to say was really encouraging.

Thank you for that. And this man said to us, he has absolutely no idea what he said. He can't remember what he said. Not by might, but by God's spirit.

You see, God is working. And he will continue to work to build his kingdom despite appearances. I hear stories like this often.

Just last week, two stories. Someone said, oh, look, I keep running into a few Christians at work. People I never thought were Christians. Another person said they've discovered lots of Christian families at their local kingdom.

[21 : 33] At local kindergarten. You see, it might seem like God's kingdom is small and unimpressive and insignificant. But it's not. It's spreading.

It's growing. As Jesus said on the next slide, what shall we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable shall we use to describe? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground.

Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants. You see, even though we can feel like we are living in a day of small things, that God's kingdom is outnumbered, that our work is small and ineffective.

Zechariah 4 reminds us that that's not the case. For God is at work through the good news of his son, Jesus, and through us, his servants. And so despite appearances, God's kingdom is growing and will continue to grow.

For he has promised to build his temple, the church. And when Jesus returns, all will see how glorious it is. And so keep doing what you can to build God's church.

[22 : 38] But do it not by your might, but by God's spirit. Trusting God will use our efforts and prayerfully relying on him. For as Jesus said, surely I am with you to the very end of the age.

So let's pray now. Father, we go to work or go to the shops or turn on the news.

And we can feel small as Christians, outnumbered, insignificant. And we can feel like the good news of your son, who died for us to bring people forgiveness, is lost in this world.

And that people are so unresponsive to it, even though it offers them eternal life. Yet, Father, we are reminded this morning that this is not the case.

That you are indeed at work through your people and in this world to grow your kingdom. And so, Father, encourage us to prayerfully rely on you.

[23 : 43] To make the most of opportunities we have. And to serve you where we can. Not by our might, but by your spirit. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.