**How will the light keep shining?**

Text: Zechariah 4:1-14

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**Scriptures:** Zechariah 4:1-14; Revelation 2:1-7

*Suggested song of response: STTL318 ‘The head that once was crowned’*

**Series: Zechariah**. Sermon 9 of 19. 5th night vision

**Theme:** God encourages his people, in particular Joshua and Zerubabbel, to rebuild the temple using His divine resources

**FCF:** We can easily be discouraged by what appear to us to be small and seemingly insignificant progress or growth

**Proposition:** Christ keeps the light from His church burning!

**Introduction**

If you hear the word ‘lampstand’ what image comes to your mind? You may think of the building at the back of the Christchurch, Cornwall Street carpark which functioned for many years as a resource centre for the distribution of Christian education material. It was called ‘the lampstand’, but it didn’t produce much light outside, apart from a little bulb which illuminates the steps! Why then the name?

This question brings us to our first point:

1. **The Lampstand (v1-6a)**

A gold lampstand was placed in the OT tabernacle (Ex 25:31-40) and then in the later temple in the holy place, opposite the table of showbread. This seven-branched candelabra (menorah) which supported seven lamps was symbolic of the nation of Israel, the covenant people of God. The light emitted from the lampstand represented both the presence of God amongst His people and abundant life. ‘The Lampstand’ is an appropriate name for a building from which Christian ministry takes place!

Now we come to the 5th night vision. In this revelation, Zechariah is woken as from a sleep and sees (v2) “*a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights*”. For Zechariah this is an encouraging image because it depicts a fully-functioning temple in which the Lord is present with His people. The message is: the temple is going to be reconstructed, worship will resume! The Lord will again be present! Keep working!

We can see the imagery of the lampstand continuing through to the New Testament. In our reading from the letter to the church in Ephesus from Revelation, we hear of Christ who ‘*walks among the seven golden lampstands*’. These lampstands symbolise the churches in their light-bearing role as the local body of Christ reflecting the glory of God. The local church has the great privilege and responsibility of bearing witness to Christ, the Light of the World.

The church herself is a lampstand when she faithfully mirrors the character of Christ, like a bright city on a hill. Jesus said, “*let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*” (Matt 5:16). However, when the church, individually or collectively, acts in such a way that the honour of the name of the Lord is not upheld, she must repent!

That’s what the Lord Jesus called the church at Ephesus to do. After commending this local church for their perseverance and hard work he said: “*Yet, I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place*” (Revelation 2:4-5)

Remember how at the start of the book of Zechariah there is a call to repentance “*Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty.”* When we do things as individuals or as a church which do not demonstrate the love of Christ, we need to repent. This covers all areas of our lives as families, our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and our neighbours all observe how we act.

As the Lord builds his church in each congregation of his people, the way in which we function will either bring the name of the Lord into dishonour or shine forth the light of Christ. If we fail to do the latter we must repent, or we may lose our witness for our Lord. Once the ‘Lampstand’ is removed from a church, then there is no proclamation of Christ. Numbers dwindle and eventually the empty church building may be sold to become a coffee shop or suchlike, as is sadly the case in many places.

For Zechariah, the vision of the Lampstand was hugely encouraging, the Lord had returned, He had not removed the lampstand from them forever! The people had repented, and the Lord had come back to them! The light was shining again!

Now you might be wondering where the two olive trees fit into all this. One of them is on the right of the bowl at the top of the lampstand, the other is on the left. Now Zechariah would have known well that olive oil was not only used extensively in the preparation of food and for medicinal purposes, but it was also used as fuel for lamps.

However, the image of two olive trees growing beside the golden lampstand causes Zechariah to ask of the interpreting angel “*what are these, my Lord?*”

Now if you look at this passage you’ll see that the prophet does not get an answer to his question. There is a break in verse 6 and it is not until verse 12 that Zechariah again asks about the two trees when he asks again saying: "*What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?*"

So, we’ll come back to this question about the olive trees in our 3rd point, but now let’s follow the angel’s response in verse 6 as he launches into an oracle to explain the meaning of the vision which is addressed to the person who stands in the line of kings descended from David, Zerubbabel. We’ve already seen that the shining Lampstand is located within the Temple, our text now turns to that structure:

1. **The Temple (v6b-10)**

If you asked the members of a church building committee if it’s easy work getting a church construction project off the ground, they might humbly say “no, it’s actually a lot of hard work!” Hours of meetings, working together for unity in the committee, session and congregation and praying that resistance from neighbours and City Council would not halt the project.

Likewise, when the exiles returned to the promise land from their 70-year exile it was hard work trying to rebuild! Harder for them than for us if we are involved in church building projects here in New Zealand.

Remember that there was opposition to the rebuilding of the city wall. We read about the trouble caused by Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod in the book of Nehemiah (4-6). They were angry against those who had returned to the land and they plotted and schemed to try and halt the work. These were the days when the builders carried materials in one hand and held a weapon in the other; ‘the trowel and the sword'. The walls were broken down, the land which had once flowed with milk and honey was now a barren wilderness, the temple was destroyed, there was no king descendent from David on the throne: Zerubbabel was the Persian-appointed governor of Judah, not the anointed sovereign ruler of Israel.

Now here comes the Word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “*'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.”* Message: the rebuild is not fundamentally the work of man, but of God! The Lord’s restoration program would not be advanced through political or military struggles against Persia but by the word of Almighty God’s Holy Spirit.

Within the ancient Near East, the first task in building a new temple was to clear a level piece of ground. Just as Graceworks demolition company is contracted to leave an empty section with level ground ready for construction work to commence.

Now if you know the geography of the Jerusalem area, you’ll know that large level sections are few and far between in the hilly terrain there. You can see this reflected in our text: v7a "*What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground*” Message: The rebuild will progress. The site will be cleared, construction will commence.

Not only will it start, it will be completed! You can see this in the words: “*Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'*" The presentation of the top stone (capstone) was a ceremonial act in which a stone from the former temple became the first laid stone of the new temple – symbolising continuity between old and new. This vision shows completion of construction, continuity with the past and also confirmation that the work of building the temple, the church, is not the work of man, but a gift from the Lord.

Listen to the voices of those who see the rebuild work completed, as they shout, “God bless it, God bless it, more literally “grace, grace”. Yet, although the building of the temple is to be a work of God’s Spirit, his servant is not left to stand idly by as a passive spectator. Look at verse 8: “*The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it*”. Here Zerubbabel the descendant of king David represents all God’s people who will labour together on the temple rebuild. It will be God’s spiritual work, but he will involve His people physically in order to bring the project to completion.

Is this not how Christ builds his church? It is by the power of his Spirit, but he uses willing workers; people like you and me to work with our minds, our hands, and our hearts to serve. Each member of this congregation has been individually gifted by God so that together we may be used by our Lord to build his church. Christ’s gift of a minister and elders and deacons in a local church is so that these shepherds, teachers, servants may “*prepare/equip God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*” (Eph 4:12). As we function together we are to “*in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work*.” (Eph 4:15)

Are you using your gifts to serve the Lord in this congregation? Are you a willing part of what God is doing now in building this church?

It must have looked like a small and struggling work for the returned exiles seeking to rebuild the temple from a pile of rubble in the broken-down city of Jerusalem. Yet the Lord encourages his people not to look so much with physical sight but with the eyes of faith. He asks the question? v10 “*Who despises the day of small things?*

The implied answer is that no one should despise times when the work of the Lord SEEMS small. As the returned exiles struggled to get the temple rebuilt, it was a much smaller structure and less ornate structure than the previous temple of Solomon.

The “day of small things” points forward to the seeming smallness and weakness of the cross. Do not despise Calvary! Jesus said (John 12:24) “*I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*”. A seed is small thing. Christ was just one man, dying one death. Many people were whipped, beaten and crucified in Roman times.

Yet whilst the day of Christ’s death seemed a small and dismal day, it was necessary so that the day of resurrection would come. What seemed small is becoming a worldwide kingdom of Christ’s willing subjects so that the earth will one day be “*filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea*” (Habakkuk 2:14)

It can seem like in the church that there is little spiritual progress at times. The congregation may look small and be struggling, the elders and pastor hard pressed by the workload. Do not despise the power of individual and corporate prayer, do not despise serving in the smallest of tasks, do not despise the small sacrifice of time to meet with a brother or sister in the Lord to read God’s Word together and pray.

v10 “*Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel*”

When the final stone is laid and set squarely in place with a plumb line, then everyone will see that the work has been completed, just as the Lord through his prophet Zechariah had promised.

Now the angel returns to Zechariah’s question about the vision in v4: *“What are these, my Lord?”* – which brings us to our 3rd point:

1. **The Anointed (v10b-14)**

Now Zechariah discovers what the seven lamps on top of the lampstand are. v10b “*These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth*”. The image here connects to the single stone with seven eyes in the 4th vision. It is not only that the Lord watches everything which takes place in his creation, but that he is watching to see the people’s response to His faithfulness in completing the work He has promised to do by His Spirit.

Worship in the newly built temple was to be an expression of thankfulness to the Lord for what He had done. Now Zerubbabel asks again about the olive trees: "*What are these two olive branches beside the two gold pipes that pour out golden oil?*" The way his question is worded shows that the olive trees are supplying their oil in order to fuel the burning of the lampstand. The picture is of an inexhaustible supply of oil which will keep the lampstand shining forever.

Remember the parable of the five foolish virgins in Matthew 25 who had no oil to fuel their lamps, as they were going to buy some, the bridegroom arrived and the ill-prepared virgins without lamp-oil were shut out. There’s no need to buy oil for the lampstand in this vision. No topping up of the oil reservoir, no possibility of the light dimming or going out. The fuel supply from the twin olive trees will just keep on flowing through the gold pipes into the bowl to provide for the seven lamps. This message of perpetual supply means that the Lord will never again leave His temple, His people, His church. How is this possible?

The angel asks if Zechariah knows what the two sources of fuel for the lampstand are. These he explains are the two who are ‘anointed’ (literally ‘the sons of oil’). The two anointed ones are the Lord’s agents who stand beside. There were two different groups of people anointed with oil in the Old Testament: priests (Lev. 8:30) and kings (e.g. Saul: 1 Sam 24:6). There is a connection here for Zechariah’s time with Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest and Zerubbabel the descendant of David. In the immediate context, Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the governor lead the reconstruction of the temple. Yet, Zerubbabel did not ‘stand by the Lord of the whole earth’. He was not anointed as king of Israel. The nation was under foreign domination by Persia.

The key here lies in the Hebrew word which means ‘anointed one’. It is the word ‘messiach’, ‘Messiah’, or in Greek, Christos, Christ. Whilst Zerubbabel is somewhat in the kingly office, and Joshua in the priestly, the coming Messiah would be both. He would be a Priestly King who would provide the source of light for the temple, for the covenant community of God’s people, for the church.

Ultimately the One true light is the Lord Himself who said: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* (John 8:12) This vision climaxes with the prophecy that Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, The High Priest and King of Kings will one day stand in the presence of the Lord of all the earth and will provide the source of illumination for his church so that she is able to continuously shine the light of the gospel into a dark world. Christ Himself is the light which must shine within his church! He alone is the source of illumination. When we are close to him, we reflect his glory to each other and to the world around us.

How will the church here grow and flourish? How will this congregation continue to be rebuilt? By clever programmes, fancy preaching, saturating the neighbourhood with maildrops? No.

By reflecting the glory of Christ! In every thought, every word, every conversation, every interaction with each other and those who visit here, or we visit them.

By reflecting the glory of Christ as we strive in the Spirit’s strength to put off our old selves, which are being corrupted by its deceitful desires; and to be made new in the attitude of our minds; and to put on our new selves, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:22-24)

By ensuring that Christ is always worshipped and proclaimed in the church, like the Lampstand in this vision was set in the temple as the source of eternal light. A lamp which would never go out!

In this 5th vision we see the promise of the glory of God shining out from amongst his people through Christ the anointed Priest-King. Here we also see encouragement not to despise what may seem to be the small work of the Lord in our midst. It is not by human might, nor by worldly power that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is built, but by the Spirit of God at work in the hearts of those He loves.

AMEN