

Zechariah 4:1-14 I AM Still Here: In the Process
CCC – August 20, 2023

Are you ever discouraged by the slow work of change in your life? Do you ever tire of your own incompleteness? Do you see the gulf between your sin and your holiness and long for a fuller display of God's holiness and love? I do. I am too often impatient with my own heart – and others – as we live in this tension between who we are and who we are becoming. This morning's passage speaks into the process as God works out His purposes. It brings, I believe, encouragement for our unfinished states.

But first some context. Throughout our series this summer, we've looked closely at a period in the history of God's people where they experienced great trial, change and uncertainty but also saw God's miraculous hand at work. God's enduring message to them was this: I AM Still Here – no matter what you face, no matter what you're going through. I AM Still Here and still at work to bring about my glorious purposes.

We've spent time in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezra. Many books, ONE story, ONE broad time period. A brief reminder when that was – Jerusalem was besieged and finally conquered, the Temple was destroyed in 586bc. There were three separate deportations of God's people to Babylon. After living there in exile for more than a generation, the Lord raises up King Cyrus of Persia, who fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy and allows the people to return to their lands, govern themselves – to an extent – and even rebuild the Temple. This takes place in 539bc.

And so about 50K people return. And what's the first thing they do as they gather corporately? They build the altar. They put first things first and they set aside the space to prioritize their relationship with God. They didn't want to repeat the sins of their ancestors, who were drawn into the worship of idols. A year or so later they also laid the foundation for the Temple, and though some wept because they thought it was small and unimpressive, there were also shouts of praise and rejoicing. Momentum!

Today's passage is from Zechariah 4. The first 6 chapters of Zechariah are a series of visions he received in the 11th month of 520bc. This means about 17-18 years have passed since Ezra 3. What has happened with all this momentum? Do you ever tire of your own incompleteness?

Scripture Reading (Zechariah 4:1-14) and Prayer

And so the year is 520bc; it's been 18 years since the foundation of the Temple was laid. And what have the people done? Very little, it appears. Ezra 4:24 tells us that *the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia*. What happened to first things first? Distracted by rebuilding their own homes, overwhelmed by the immensity of the vision, discouraged by the enemies that have surrounded them, the Temple remains unbuilt. You've seen those building sites where the land is cleared but the house or business never goes up? There's a sign near my house

advertising 50 new homes coming in 2022! What's there now? Nothing. Woods. Time to change the sign. I hope Zerubbabel didn't have a coming soon sign at the building site.

It turns out that sometimes it's easier to start something than to finish it. I have sympathy here. I can't throw stones. I have a host of projects that I've started... and are waiting to be finished. Projects around the house, plans and projects in the church. Sure, lots of things intervene – the tyranny of the urgent, the appeal of something new, pressing concerns, or sometimes simply a fatigue of heart or body that slows down the momentum. What is needed when things are at a standstill?

For the lack-of-movement scene of ancient Jerusalem, God raised up and wove together the various gifts and strengths of His people. Ezra 5 and 6 show us how the prophetic, the priestly and the kingly functioned together for His purposes in His people. Haggai and Zechariah work with Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua to move this project forward. And they are together with the elders of the Jews, not to mention all the laborers, artisans and tradesmen who had their hands on the physical materials themselves.

And so as we read Zech 4, we're experiencing Zechariah playing his God-ordained role to honor God. He speaks what he sees in these dreams and visions. And the message is powerful and lasting.

And so what is the message of this chapter? I AM Still Here, I am with you, **IN the process**. During the delays and detours, during the mistakes and misses; I AM Still Here. Amid fear and failure – I am still here. We need to know that God is in the process. And He will complete what He's begun. Especially in what we know is important and from Him – let's not get so sidetracked that we stop or give up. Completion is a PROCESS, and God is with us.

What's in process in your life? Think about it. Our most important relationships, our spiritual transformation, our call. Maybe it would be easier to ask, What's NOT in process? But here's the follow-up. What do you need now in that process? What are the obstacles? What are frustrations and the areas that scream INCOMPLETE at you? I want you to keep these before you as the message continues.

What's in process in the life of this body? A church is always changing. We are, by God's grace, becoming a church into a second and third generation. We are, by God's grace, developing new vision for a new season. We are, by God's grace, always learning the way of love and obedience and faithfulness. We're in process.

Through Zechariah, God speaks into a process. "This work of building the Temple, and even moreso of re-establishing a people of worship in the land – this is difficult work. You have begun. That's good. I have not left you or forsaken you. Now it's time to carry on." Through Zechariah, God gives a word for the process. And through the YES and AMEN of Jesus Christ, I believe we too can receive a word for the process.

So let's return to Zechariah 4. The beginning verses, 1-5, give us an odd picture (with vivid imagery and symbolism that was super common to this genre); the end, v11-14, explains that picture to some extent. And in the middle, v6-10, we have a direct word of strength and encouragement to Zerubbabel and to the people.

We're going to start with the middle and work our way to the outside. Doing so, we'll find three words for the edification of God's people in the process. Beginning with a...

I. Word of Strengthening

v6 *This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord Almighty.*

Zerubbabel knew the task before him to build the Temple. He knew how tall of a mountain it was. As a leader, he knew the obstacles. He had already confronted resistance in the people. Haggai 1:2 tells us the climate of the community: *These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house.'* His leadership was working against this sludge. And who knows what internal spiritual and emotional obstacles he was facing. Doubt. Fear. Discouragement.

Into this process, God was saying to Zerubbabel – THIS is how you lead, fulfill your call. Not through your own might or power, but through MY Spirit. You can't will this into being. You're not going to be able to get this done through your clout or charisma. Let me remind you – you may be building a physical Temple, but this is spiritual work. The only way it will be accomplished to bring me glory is by MY SPIRIT.

Now, though this word is given to Zerubbabel, The NT confirms that we live by the Spirit. This is part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ as well. Jesus as given us the Spirit to be with us and help us, as John 14 says. We are led by this Spirit and speak by the Spirit and minister to one another by the Spirit. All our work and our call, too, is empowered by the Spirit.

Now since this is true, HOW? What does it look like to work by the Spirit? We can't rip the certainty of the Temple building project out of context and claim for certain that God's going to give us that house, or that job, or success in that venture. But we CAN know that God longs for us to work with the strength of HIS Spirit.

It comes down to a matter of our way vs. God's way. Our way defaults to power and might. Not necessarily physical strength, but the might of my intellect or the might or reason or the might of strategy or the simple 'power' of working harder with more stamina. What power and might do you employ? What is your fleshly default? And yet, Paul teaches us: *If we walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh* (Gal 5:16).

Working by God's Spirit is a different kind of power. Let's remember Paul's prayer, *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.* (Eph 3:16-17)

When we believe, the Spirit strengthens us. How? Christ himself lives in us. THIS is divine power. Christ, the hope of glory. We enter and work our process with Christ in us. Christ in us is a gift of courage. Christ in us is a gift of self-discipline. Christ in us is a gift of sacrificial love. As Paul writes, *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline* (2 Tim 1:7). Christ in us is a gift of encouragement and hope and peace.

Ironically, by saying NO to human strength, God's Spirit strengthens us. We can know – this is not on my shoulders. As a disciple of Jesus, my work is to be done by the Spirit. By the Spirit we parent. By the Spirit we disciple. By the Spirit we care for aging parents. By the Spirit we take on that redemptive good project at work.

In the process, we work by God's Spirit. After this word of strengthening comes a...

II. Word of Encouragement

v7-10 are filled with affirmations and encouragements: Zerubbabel WILL complete what he's started. Mountains will become level paths, obstacles laid low. The people praising the great completion of the work when Z himself oversees the ribbon cutting ceremony.

Well... this is great for Zerubbabel and for God's people 2500 years ago. But what does it say to us in all our unfinishedness? What does it say to the church? Let's focus in on v10: *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 in the hand of Zerubbabel?*

What does this mean? God is all-knowing, and He sees what's going to happen. His omniscience is represented by the 7 eyes in typical apocalyptic symbolism. Therefore, God can tell the people ahead of time that He will rejoice at the completion of this Temple, even though it seems like nothing now.

And here's the encouragement: It seems like nothing, but it IS something important. You may remember from Ezra 3:12 how a few of the old-timers, who had seen Solomon's Temple, were weeping at the apparent smallness of this new Temple's footprint. And Haggai 2 says something very similar. But their cynicism is not the last word.

What is man to compare and compete? Who is man to show contempt for what looks small and insignificant now? GOD delights in this work and is doing something here that they can't even fathom. And this gets us into the mystery of the symbols of the lampstand and olive tree.

But before we get there. Can you relate? Does your work, your life seem insignificant, out of the way, hidden, small? What discourages your heart related to the work you do? Do we despise the small things? Is that a temptation?

We are known and loved and led by a God who sent his Son to grow up in Nazareth. What good can come from Nazareth? Who was Mary the mother of Jesus? Was she known and

celebrated? Yet she's called *highly favored*. And did not all the angels rejoice at his birth? Do not despise the small things.

And who but God knows what God will do with faithfulness now in the small things? When we do them by His Spirit, they are a matter of pleasure to our God. The effect of all this is a buoying of spirit! An encouragement to press on and not give up, especially in light of what might appear impossible or of no account, because God sees and delights in faithfulness.

Zechariah's vision is a strengthening word and an encouraging word... and we haven't even gotten to the vivid images. But we're turn there now to close. In the olive tree and the lampstand, there is a...

III. Word of Enduring Hope

If we're confused by the symbolism here, we can take heart that Zechariah himself had to ask multiple times about what he was seeing. v11-12, *What are they two olive trees on either side of the lampstand? And again I asked, what are these two olive branches beside the gold pipes (channels) that pour out golden oil?*

The meant something for Zechariah's day – and they also point to something beyond, something greater – which still ministers to us today.

It's likely that the lampstand is this Temple being built and its oil is a symbol for God's presence by the Spirit among His people, similar to how the lampstand was seen in the original Tabernacle and Temple.

The angel tells Zechariah that the olive trees are *two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth* (14). Being anointed, often with oil, was a sign of being set apart by the Spirit for a task. Olive trees were common to this part of the world and symbols of flourishing and righteousness.

Given the context, it's likely that on one level these two olive trees symbolize Joshua and Zerubbabel, in their priestly and kingly functions, serving God in that season to build the Temple.

But this vision also looks forward. In his previous vision, 3:8, Zechariah calls Joshua and his associates, *men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch*. So too here, these images are symbolic of things to come. The olive trees and their branches, filled with the Spirit, point to an Enduring Flourishing, an enduring Hope.

There was another coming King and a coming Priest, anointed by the Spirit to serve God for the flourishing of God's people. And HE is the Messiah, Jesus, the Son of God. And through Him, God establishes his lampstand, His church, to last – despite opposition, despite apparent smallness. He pours out his Spirit like oil so that we might shine brightly for His glory. And He is Still At His Work.

Conclusion

Even though it's a process, GOD is establishing his presence among His people. I AM still here, **in the process**. I AM establishing my people for all time. And so for us as we in all our working, in all our living, in all our praying – there is an enduring Hope.

And so – are you in process? The answer is YES. But what do you need in the process? Do you need strength and encouragement to carry on? Rely upon God's Spirit. Know that GOD sees you, and God finishes what He has begun. Do you need a hope that lasts beyond this light and momentary affliction? The Lord Jesus himself is sustaining His people.

Prayer

Bread/Cup

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Where are you in the process? Is any of this discouraging or intimidating in this season?
2. What situation in your life right now needs a word of strengthening or encouragement?
3. Where are you tempted to operate in your own strength and power?
4. How might the Lord encourage you to press on?