

‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit’

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Preacher: Donald Smith

[0:00] Well, not all journeys are straightforward, are they? Things go wrong a lot of the time.

! Flights get delayed, roads are closed, trains get cancelled. But just because a journey isn't! straightforward, it doesn't mean, does it, that we always just give up on it. This year, the family spent New Year's Day in Inverness, and we were planning on coming back on Friday, on the afternoon of the Friday, but one glance at the weather forecast was enough to convince us to leave a few hours earlier than planned, because, as I'm sure we all remember, snow, and quite a lot of it was on the forecast. So we set off a little before 11, and an hour and a half later, but we had stopped in Elgin for lunch. It had been nothing but sunshine on the drive there.

But as Mary, my wife, spent like half an hour standing at McDonald's waiting for an order they'd forgotten about, the sunshine very quickly gave way to a blizzard.

Looking out the car window, I phoned my parents, who were an hour or so ahead of us on the roads, and it turned out they were completely stuck. They were at a standstill in a long queue of traffic just outside Keith. So when Mary eventually kind of made it back into the car, we had a decision to make.

Do we turn around and head back where we have come from, where the roads are clear, where we know the journey will be much easier, or do we drive on? Do we drive on into the snow, facing a whole lot more difficulty on a journey that would be nowhere near as straightforward?

[1:58] What should we do? Where should we go? Now, if the ease of the journey was all that mattered, the decision would be very straightforward, wouldn't it? It's pretty obvious what we should do if all that mattered was the journey itself.

Choose the path of least resistance. But we chose to drive on into the snow, into potential difficulty, not because the journey would be easier, but because of where that journey would take us. We had our eyes set on home.

And so that is the road we took, even though it meant what was at times a painfully slow and slightly treacherous journey. It was the harder road to take, but it was worth it because of what we knew was waiting for us at the other end. Zechariah here in this book is writing to an audience of people on a journey. Having come from Babylon, their destination is not just Jerusalem itself, but a rebuilt, renewed Jerusalem. In Zechariah's day, they had geographically arrived at Jerusalem, but it was still rubble, not a renewed city. They were in Jerusalem, but they were also, sort of, in Elgin. Probably not a comparison that's been made many times. But they were at a point, right, where they had started the journey. They had got going. They had left Babylon. They had picked up the tools in Jerusalem. They were on their way, but then the road before them suddenly became very difficult.

Opposition had arisen. The economic situation was truly dire. And so the road that continued onwards, continuing to return to the Lord, that road all of a sudden looked very, very difficult.

The return journey to Babylon was looking much more straightforward. Look at the two roads, and one looks much more appealing. But God gives Zechariah these visions to point the people forward, to look beyond the difficult path and to what is waiting at the end of the journey.

[4 : 23] We've just read the last four visions Zechariah receives, and they are pretty, well, I don't know what you thought as we read through them. When I first read through this passage, I can assure you, I did not think, ah, of course, that all makes perfect sense. It is not immediately obvious. What I do think is going on here across these four visions is that God is lifting up the head of his people beyond the two roads that lay immediately before them, lifting their heads and showing them the two destinations that lie at the end of each of those roads. First, God points them to the destination that is waiting at the end of the difficult journey, and there the house of God sits.

Then he shows them what is waiting at the end of the easy road where another house is, not the house of God, but the house of wickedness, where the Lord of armies will one day send his army to bring a just judgment. And this is all shown so that the people would not, not return to Babylon, but instead continue to return to the Lord, assured that the palpably painful path is the one that will lead them home. That is what we see across these four visions. We'll get into the details and nuances of each vision in a few minutes. But before we turn to that, I just want us to begin by thinking about the kind of the solid foundation that these four visions rest upon, because they need a solid foundation.

I don't know if you've ever set off on holiday to a destination that kind of looked amazing in the pictures, but the real thing never quite lived up to the advert. Sometimes destinations promised aren't all they're cracked up to be, but not only are these visions kind of pictures, they're also pictures of the future. And the future is notoriously difficult to be sure of, isn't it? We even take tomorrow's weather forecast with a pinch of salt, although if it said raining and cloudy, I think I'd believe it.

But forecasting what the world will look like in a year is, for us, it's impossible, isn't it? So twice a year, the Office for Budget Responsibility, the OBR, produces a forecast for the economy and public finances. And do you know how often they get it right?

Right. Well, let me tell you what the OBR says about their own forecasts. Right, they wrote this in a kind of self-assessment in 2023. They wrote, single-point economic forecasts of an uncertain future are almost certain to be wrong. A single-point forecast of an outcome has virtually no chance of being correct. Right, the people whose job it is to forecast the future, that is what they say about their own forecasts. Which means if you made your life decisions today, based on what the OBR says is going to happen in the next 12 months, you are setting the direction of your life based on something that has virtually no chance of becoming reality. Zechariah's visions present a picture of a place not just far away, but far in the future. So why? Why should the returned exiles, why should we here this evening set the course of our lives according to these visions?

[8 : 02] Why should we trust these words any more than we trust the OBR's latest prediction? Well, the answer is in one of the most well-known verses of Zechariah. Just look there with me at verse 6 of chapter 4. Then the angel said to Zechariah, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

By my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. We've already seen through this prophet God kind of given this title repeatedly. We were thinking a little last Sunday morning and again this morning about the Lord, the Lord, the I Am, the infinite, eternal, transcendent, unchangeable gods. That is who the Lord is there in capital letters, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, transcendent, all-powerful. And on top of that, Zechariah has repeatedly emphasized that he is the Lord of hosts, the Lord of armies, the Lord Almighty. The infinite, eternal, unchangeable God who has an immense, immeasurable army at his disposal.

That is who God is, and it is by his Spirit that everything foretold in these visions is going to happen. Did you see why that makes a difference? In every one of these visions that we're looking at this evening, that the one at work, the one bringing about these things, the one who's going to bring each of these visions in reality is not people like you and me. It is not penitent on people, and it cannot be thwarted by even the most powerful people because it will all be brought about by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts. Joe mentioned last week that the limited power of even the most powerful presidents, the one who said that he was going to bring a war to an end in a day, he made a forecast of the future that did not come to pass, did it? Because as powerful as he is relative to us, he is not nearly powerful enough to direct history according to his will. But the Lord of hosts is in a category of one.

The Lord of hosts can, by the power of his Spirit, and because he sets about to bring all this to pass, not dependent on or threatened by the might of men, but by the power of his Spirit, it will happen.

What we have in these visions is not what God hopes for. It's not what God thinks might happen. It is what God is going to do because of who he is and because of how he is set about to work, not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. That is why we can have absolute confidence in these pictures of the future. Not what someone thinks might happen, but what the Lord of hosts will bring about by his Spirit. We can set our lives according to what he says here, and we should set our lives according to what he says here. So let's take a closer look at those pictures now, those four visions. We're going to do that by focusing really on two kind of overarching points this evening that encompass all four of these visions together. First, God's glory will shine from the temple built by the Son of David. Secondly, wickedness will be removed through a judgment that will bring rest. So let's just see each of these points in turn, beginning back in that fifth vision there in chapter four, where we see God's glory will shine from the temple built by the Son of David.

[12:18] There in verse one, Zechariah is once again stirred by the angel who has kind of guided him through these visions thus far, and on this occasion, he sees before him a golden lampstand with a bowl on top of it and seven lamps and seven lips or spouts or kind of wick holders on it. It's hard to kind of confidently create an exact replica of what Zechariah is looking at here. It's not entirely clear, but what is relatively clear is the emphasis. The golden lampstand is a link to the golden lampstands that stood at the heart of the tabernacle and then the temple, the places throughout the history of God's people where God had come to dwell with them. The golden lampstand immediately points to God's presence with his people. It points to his presence in the past, but it actually points to something more than that, because whatever exactly the kind of seven lips there are, it is definitely something more, something more than the previous temple lampstands. There's even more light shining from this lampstand than it had ever previously shone in Israel before, and it is a perfect light.

Seven, you might well know, is the kind of Hebrew number for perfection, completion. We have two lots of seven here. Very simply, it is a whole lot of light, and it is a perfect amount of light, a full light, a symbol of the fullness of God's presence and the fullness of his glory.

But what really takes Zechariah by surprise in this vision is what he sees either side of this golden lampstand, because what was definitely not in the temple or the tabernacle was two trees.

But that is what Zechariah sees, two olive trees, one on either side of the lampstand. That's definitely new. And so Zechariah asks, what are these, my Lord? Again, it's reassuring, isn't it? We find ourselves slightly bemused by the imagery of these visions, and there are six occasions across these four visions where Zechariah basically has to ask what on earth is going on. Zechariah asks the question, what are these? And the angel will answer it in a few verses' time. But before he gets there, he needs to stop for a moment and say something to a man called Zerubbabel. He might seem to have appeared out of nowhere in the book, but he certainly was not a nobody in Jerusalem, because Zerubbabel was the governor of the time, and significantly, not only was he the governor of Jerusalem. He was also a son of David, heir to the vacant throne of Judah. The rest of this vision, this fifth vision here, promises two amazing things that will happen through this son of David.

First, the temple will be built through the son of David. Zerubbabel was only governor at this time.

[15:43] Ben highlighted in kind of the opening sermon on this series how striking it was that the time stamp at the beginning of this book did not refer to the king of Judah, but the king of Persia. Zerubbabel was in the line of the Davidic promise, but he had no crown on his head.

And yet the lack of worldly power would do nothing to stop what God would do through him, to build up his dwelling place from start to finish. That is what Zerubbabel did do for this second temple in Jerusalem, but we have already seen a hint, haven't we, that this vision is pointing to something bigger, do something more beautiful. We learn in Ezra that from the moment the foundations of this second temple were laying, everyone knew it was less impressive than the first.

But this is a vision of a greater temple, because there is a greater light shining from it. What God would do through this son of David was just foreshadowing what God would do through the son of David. The son of David who sat on no earthly throne, who lived under the power of kings and rulers who opposed him, who sought to put him to death. A son of David whose only crown in Jerusalem was one of thorns was one of thorns. And yet because the Lord of hosts brings about his purposes not through might, nor through strength, but by his spirit, because that is how the Lord works.

The son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, the descendant of Zerubbabel, is now building God's dwelling place on earth from cornerstone to capstone.

That is God's first amazing promise to Zerubbabel, not by might, not by strength, but by his spirit, through the son of David, the temple would be built.

[17:59] The second amazing promise in this vision is that through the son of David, the temple will be lit. In verse 14, Zechariah finally gets his answer to the question about the olive trees and its branches.

The angel reveals that the branches of the olive trees fueling the lamp are the two anointed ones of the Lord, who stand by the Lord. And what is going on here? Well, the two anointed ones are the two, the two individuals who we have seen take center stage over the last couple of chapters here, that the high priests and the son of David. Those are the offices in the Old Testament that required anointing. And here, Zechariah sees that the high priests and the son of David are directly and constantly fueling the shining light of the temple. They are its life source.

That is a staggering thing. The glory of God shining in the temple, shining out into Jerusalem, shining out into the world. The source of that light is the son of David.

But it is the son of David who has been anointed with a new oil. You might see there that in a footnote in verse 12 and verse 14, a new oil has anointed these individuals, anointed not with the man-made oil of old, but with an oil straight from the source, anointed by the Lord himself, standing by the Lord himself in order to constantly shine out the glory of God. We're going to learn a little bit more about what this all is pointing to next week when JT preaches from the end of Zechariah 6. But for now, notice how the son of David occupies a central place, not only in the building of the temple, but the purpose of the temple, to shine out God's glory as God's anointed.

The apostle John opens his gospel by introducing us to the words who gives light to everyone. Who had light and life in himself.

[20 : 28] The son of God in whom we see the glory of the Father shining forth. He is the builder of God's temple. He is at the heart of God's temple. The shining light, anointed not by man, but by God, empowered for his work by the Spirit.

Not a mighty ruler in the world, but the anointed light of the world. It's an epic vision that looks forward in so many ways to Jesus, the son of David.

Perhaps the obvious question is, what does it all mean? Why does it matter? Why did the people then need to see this, need to hear about this? Why do we here today need this vision?

Well, I think it's doing two things, but both for them then and us today alike. First, it is, I think, an encouragement or a reminder not to measure the strength of the church, but by the metrics of the world.

If Zerubbabel or any of the other inhabitants of Jerusalem, if they were looking for confidence to keep going, to march forward on the difficult path ahead, if they were looking for confidence to take that path based on the weight of their wallets, or the number of people they had at their disposal, or their kind of political clout, it would be time to give up.

[21 : 55] Throw in the towel. Throw away the troubles. Put down the tools and move back to Babylon. And for us, too. We know, don't we, that the church, the church is not going to move mountains with its military might.

But it doesn't need to. Because, verse 7, God moves the mountains. Not by might, not by strength, but by his spirit.

There is no strength in the church to build itself up as a kingdom, but God raises his kingdom by the power of his spirit. Don't despair at the state of Christ's church on earth because of its apparent weakness in a world drunk on power.

Because all the might of this world will shrink at the power of God's spirit. And God's spirit is and will grow God's church through Jesus, the son of David.

So don't despair. And secondly, persevere. Persevere. Because this is the sure and certain hope that lies at the end of what will often be a difficult road.

[23 : 16] A sure and certain hope of God coming to live amongst his people in an even more glorious way than he has done in the past. He's already done that to one degree by coming to dwell amongst his people by his spirit.

That one day an even greater fulfillment will come. In a new Jerusalem, a new creation, built by God's hands, where we read in Revelation 21, that the lamp who is the lamb, Jesus Christ, will shine out with the glory of God to all of his people, being their light, their life forever.

It's a picture, I think, more brilliant than we can properly comprehend. And it is guaranteed. It's not a prediction of the future. It is a sure and certain picture of the future.

Because the Lord of hosts will bring it about by his spirit. This is the hope that lies at the end of the road that returns to the Lord.

For them then, and for us now. So don't despair, but persevere, holding this hope before you now and always.

[24 : 34] So God's glory will shine from the temple built by the Son of David. And then secondly, then in the final three visions, wickedness will be removed through a judgment that will bring rest.

We'll move through these visions quite quickly. Things get really strange, don't they, in chapter five. But first, a massive scroll, about ten meters by five meters, kind of flies over the land.

It is a picture of God's word, particularly the covenant curses, which were the just consequences for lawlessness. This word of God comes and cleans out the land.

I don't know if you notice there what it's doing. It's not, is it destroying? It's cleaning out. I think significantly at the end of the vision there, in verse four, it enters the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by my name, and it shall remain the house and consume it, both timber and stones.

Not, not the person, but the timber and the stones, the house, it cleans it all out. The home is not, the home is destroyed.

[25 : 48] The people are not. God comes to clean out what houses wickedness. We've just had, haven't we, a glorious vision of a restored and renewed temple, but there would have been an obvious question for the returned exiles.

The last temple was, well, not quite as amazing, but it was still pretty impressive, and yet it had ended up flattened, ruined, because of the disobedience of God's people.

the question on their minds would no doubt have been, if, if we, if we as God's people disobey again, can we expect this new, even more amazing temple to suffer the same fate as the old?

Right, if it's dependent on, on us, and our cleanliness, surely things are just going to go the same way again. But that is, in a way, that the wonderful message of quite a terrifying vision, it shows that this future of a glorious temple does not depend on our obedience, because while disobedience will still exist amongst God's people, God's word comes to clean it out.

The home is destroyed, the people are not. Paul writes it in Romans 6, that in Jesus, our old self was crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing.

[27 : 22] That, I think, is what is being pictured here, a part of God's people being cleaned out, something being destroyed, to bring life to God's people through the death of the sin that is in them, so that we do not need to live in fear of losing the glorious future God has promised through a new exile brought about by further disobedience, but instead confident that we will not lose this future because the body of sin has been brought to nothing, cleaned out, not by our works of obedience, but by the word of God.

The curse being brought down on the old self that was crucified with Christ, it is gone, it is removed. Wickedness is removed from us, and wickedness is removed to Babylon.

That is what we see there in the seventh vision, verses 5 to 11 of chapter 5. This vision, perhaps even stranger than the one before, that there is a basket, the basket is iniquity, and it contains, the lid is kind of lifted up, and there's wickedness.

The lid that has been cleaned out from people is now in a basket. The lid is kind of momentarily lifted off the basket, there's a woman inside that's quickly shut back in. It's all a bit odd, isn't it?

It might be a woman there because of the foreign goddesses that God's people had worshipped. It could just be that the wickedness is a feminine noun in the Hebrew. Whatever the reason, the lead in lid is thrust back down to close the basket.

[29:01] My lead is very heavy. The whole point is that wickedness is not going to escape back out into the land. It is contained and restrained, and then it is removed.

Because in verse 9, two more women appear. These women are definitely not wicked because they come to dispatch wickedness, to get rid of it, to carry it away.

And they transport it to Shinar, in verse 11, where a house is built for it. Shinar is where Babylon was.

That is where the Tower of Babel was built, where people had set themselves up against the Lord. And they transport wickedness there, and there it gets a house.

Not as a kind of compensation for relocation. It has built a house there because that is where it belongs. Not amongst God's people, but amongst God's enemies.

[30:11] Amongst those who set themselves against God. There it is set down, and there it will be destroyed. Because the eighth and final vision brings back the horsemen.

Just look there, the start of chapter 6. Four chariots appear from between two mountains, and there are red, black, white, and dappled horses, all of them strong.

Whether or not these are the same horses we met in the first vision a couple of weeks ago isn't clear, but there is definitely an allusion back to where we began. Where we began these visions was with the nations enjoying an unrighteous rest while God's people were living in ruins.

Here, we end with a picture of a certain future where God's people are not living in ruins, but a renewed Jerusalem. Where God has come to dwell with them in a land free from wickedness.

God's people are now at rest, but God is not yet at rest. Because while wickedness has been removed, it has not yet been destroyed.

[31:27] And so the Lord of hosts, who was exceedingly angry with the unrighteous rest the nations were enjoying, the Lord of armies now sends forth his army.

Half of all the Lord's hosts go north in verse 6. There is wickedness that needs dealt with everywhere, but the land north where Babylon is, it is home to wickedness.

Not only wickedness but to those who have deliberately set themselves against the Lord and against his people. Well, we do not get a kind of detailed account of what happens next, but in verse 8, we do learn that the Lord, who was exceedingly angry, is now himself at rest.

The implication is clear. The cause of his wrath has been dealt with. So that not only can his people rest, but he rests. I think there is an ominous silence to the end of these visions.

There is only one way that the Lord can be at rest in the place where people have set themselves against him. Now, there is, I think, maybe some assurance in these verses to those who have been kind of grievously wronged.

[32:56] The Lord does not let the guilty go unpunished. He will bring justice. But I don't think that is the primary point here. Because remember where we began, that there are two roads that lay before God's people.

They can take the easy road and return to the world. Or they can take the hard road and return to the Lord.

In these four visions, the Lord holds before his people the two homes that lie at the end of each road. At one end is the house of wickedness.

And one day, as much as they might be at rest now, one day the Lord will send his cavalry to deal with that wickedness in an unspeakable judgment.

Whatever happens, the righteously wrathful God was able to rest in that place. His vengeance will come down on those who return not to him, but to the world that has set themselves against him.

[34 : 21] It is a terrifying destination. The road might be very easy, but the destination is truly fearful.

But for those who return to the Lord, for those who persevere in their service of God, who endure the scorn of the nations, who live not depending on might or strength or money or power, but who depend on the spirit of the Lord of hosts, for those who return to the Lord by returning to Jesus, something truly glorious is waiting for them at the end of that road.

A brilliant, beautiful, shining light waits for them there. The son of David himself waits for us to come home to him in a renewed city in which wickedness has no hope and will never be seen again because it has been contained, restrained, and removed.

Whatever hardships the journey might contain, that glorious vision of a glorious temple where God will dwell with his people in a place free from wickedness.

That is the home that is at the end of the road for everyone who repents and believes in Jesus, who returns to the Lord and lives a life that always returns to the Lord.

[36 : 08] To the son of David who is building his temple, who is the light of the church and the light of the world. Four visions that present us with a future that might feel right now very far from reality, that might seem like little more than a dream in a sleepless night and yet this is what will happen, not by might, not by strength, but by the spirit of the Lord of hosts.

So let us, together, each and every one of us, I beg you, whoever you are here this evening, look at the paths that lay before you but more than that, look at the destination that is at the end of each of those roads and make sure your eyes are fixed on the glorious hope that we have in heaven with Christ Jesus our Lord.

Flee from the road to the land where wickedness dwells and God's judgment will come. But instead, we'll run to Jesus. Each and every day, run to Jesus.

The Jesus who is the glory of God and the builder of his church because in him we have a sure and certain hope of this glorious future, not because of anything we have done but because of all that he has done and continues to do.

Let's pray that we would daily return to him, stay on the path to our heavenly home and seek his glory above all else. Let us pray together. Father, we do thank you and praise you as the glorious God of heaven and earth, the Lord of hosts who does all that you have willed to do according to your perfect purposes, according to your infinite wisdom.

[38 : 16] Lord, we thank you that everything you have purposed to do will happen because you do it not by our strength but by your spirit. Lord, we thank you for what we have before us here in Zechariah in words that are perhaps challenging in many senses but which do bring comfort to us in seasons of difficulty when we wonder whether the road of difficulty before us is truly worth it.

Lord, we thank you for these visions which lift our head up to look forward to the sure and certain hope we have in Christ Jesus. Lord, we pray that you would help each and every one of us here to return to the Lord, to turn to Jesus, to repent and believe in him and live each and every day walking towards the heavenly home that you have prepared for us that we might rejoice in the wonderful hope of dwelling with you forever and ever.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.