

August 9, 2026

INSIGHTS ON THE NATURE OF GOD'S WORK

Zechariah 4:1-14

(5 of 10 in a series through Zechariah)

In 1792 the spirit of evangelism was lacking among Particular Baptists in England. Hyper-Calvinism had taken root among some, teaching that believers had no responsibility to go and preach the gospel to those who had not heard. And yet, by God's grace, a group of young men read the Scriptures and began to feel compelled otherwise. Finally, in an associational meeting in that year, some of these young men—including Andrew Fuller and William Carey—preached stirring messages about the need to go and preach the gospel to those who had never heard it, and out of that meeting a missionary society was born. It was named "The Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen." I think they needed an acrostic like we have with the IMB, but admittedly PBSPGAH doesn't quite flow off the tongue.

The first place they wanted to target was India, and the first two men they chose to send there were John Thomas and William Carey. Thomas was an obvious choice. He was a surgeon who had spent time in Calcutta, India, and so he would have some familiarity with all things there. Carey was an obvious choice in that his zeal to go was overwhelming. He'd ended his sermon at that associational meeting urging his brothers to attempt great things and expect God to do great things. And so, Thomas, Carey, and Carey's wife and children set off for India. But almost immediately things took a turn for the worse.

Carey had anticipated that the men would take the money they'd left England with, build a house, and live off the land. But he yielded to the wisdom of Thomas who was more familiar with the area. But Thomas was less than helpful. He underestimated the cost of living there, overestimated how much they could get for selling some items they'd brought with them, and eventually found out there was an arrest warrant out for him since he'd left England with unpaid debts. Eventually Thomas fled to another area to resume his work as surgeon, reasoning it was his only way to pay off his debts, and took much of their money with him.

Carey and his family were left alone. They arranged to live in a shack, were broke, and were suffering from dysentery. Eventually they were able to move closer to the area where they wanted to minister by settling in an area that had been abandoned by natives because of the frequent tiger attacks. Carey's wife struggled to accept their conditions, they watched their five-year-old son die from disease, and six years into their mission, they still hadn't seen one convert. Needless to say, the excitement that had been Carey's when he urged his brothers to attempt great things and expect great things had dwindled. This simply didn't look like the promise of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation coming into Christ's kingdom.

As I've noted, this same kind of disillusionment could have been felt by those Israelites who left Babylonian exile in the 539 BC to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Initially, things were great. Zerubbabel, a descendant from David and the rightful heir to the throne, functioned

as a governor in the area, and Joshua the high priest assisted him as they led the people to lay the foundation of the temple in 538-537 BC. But then all kinds of adversity hit.

First, many of the Israelites themselves who had seen the previous temple were discouraged by the site of the foundation of this new temple, feeling like it paled in comparison. Therefore, though many shouted for joy at the foundation of the temple being laid, many others loudly wept so that you couldn't distinguish the joyful shout from the loud weeping (Ezra 3:12-13). But there wasn't just discouragement from within. People around them were opposing them, enough that these opponents eventually petitioned the Persian king, making false accusations and lying, in order to get him to order them to stop. And he did. As we noted at the start of this series, no more work was done on the temple for seventeen years, until the Lord raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who exhorted the people to get back to building.

And yet, even when they got back to building the opposition didn't go away. They were still mocked. They were still challenged. But it's in this setting that Zechariah received these visions to prophesy and encourage a people that could be discouraged in the good work the Lord called them to do. And in this fifth vision, the Lord is especially encouraging as he provides a picture that reveals some of the most edifying truths any believer can hear. And I think it's fair to say that what the Lord says to (and ultimately through) Zechariah as he gives him this vision is true of how God works among his people throughout all ages. Therefore, I want to note three truths about God's work that comes through in this fifth vision. First, God's work is accomplished by the Spirit.

God's work is accomplished by the Spirit

As the text begins, the angel who has been guiding Zechariah through these visions wakes him to show him another. Since the text says the angel woke him "like a man who is awakened out of sleep," it may mean that Zechariah was awakened in the sense of being summoned when you were focused on something else. Whatever the nature of this awakening, the angel does so because he wants to show him another vision. But the angel doesn't start by describing the vision but by asking Zechariah what he sees so that the prophet answers, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left" (vv. 2-3).

Now, the meaning of this is going to be given to us, but let's start by making sure we understand what Zechariah is seeing. First, he's going to describe a lamp, but it's not a lamp like we're familiar with, with light bulbs, powered by electricity. This would have been a lamp where it's lights were small flames, burning olive oil. And because it needed olive oil to burn, there's a bowl on the lampstand to hold the oil necessary for burning. Then, on top of the bowl are seven lamps with seven lips, that is, seven channels for the oil to flow to the wicks that were lit to provide light. In other words, it was probably the kind of lamp Zechariah would have been familiar with, something like a seven-candle menorah, if you can picture that. However, there was one key difference that set this lamp apart.

There were two olive trees, one on each side of the bowl that held oil for the lamp. The idea, of course, is that this bowl wouldn't need to have someone come and continually pour olive oil into it so that it could be burned. Rather, these trees would continually supply oil to the bowl so that it might be lit and the lamp burn continually without any outside assistance. That's the picture Zechariah sees.

Well, it's one thing to see the picture but another to understand its significance. And so Zechariah and the angel go back and forth with Zechariah asking what these things are, the angel asking him if he truly doesn't know, and Zechariah assuring him that he doesn't, before the angel finally answers him saying, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of, 'Grace, grace to it!'" (vv. 6-7).

In other words, here's what the Lord is saying through this vision. Zerubbabel, as the governor who led the people alongside Joshua to lay the foundation of the temple nearly two decades earlier, is going to be strengthened by the Lord to continue in this task. But he needs to understand that it won't be because Zerubbabel is some strong and mighty leader. It'll be because the Spirit is going to enable this to happen, supplying continual strength like the trees supply continual oil to the lamp. When obstacles like mountains come before him—as we've mentioned from within and without the people—they shall be removed and become like a plain. And he'll bring forth the capstone of this temple with the people shouting shouts of joy.

But again, it's all by the power of the Spirit, not man. God's Spirit will continually supply Zechariah what he needs like the oil flowing from those two trees, continually supplying the lamp and allowing it to burn. God alone will therefore be worthy of glory in this project, for he will be the one to do it.

And this is the first key for us to understand—God's work is accomplished by God's Spirit. It was true with the building of the temple here, it's true of everything that has happened among us at Cornerstone, and it's true for every church planter and pastor we send out this door. Everything good that happens in and through us is done by the Spirit of God. And we must not forget that. The day we confuse ourselves and think that any good thing done among us is by our might or power, we have set ourselves up to be opposed by our Lord. He does not share his glory with any man. And so, as we think back over all the glorious things the Lord has done here in and through this church, it is the work of the Spirit of God, and he alone must be praised. And that is true with whatever good thing is to come. If, by God's grace, the day comes that this new sanctuary is complete and paid off and we get to gather in it and pray for more men as we send them out to plant and pastor, we will say, "God alone, by his Spirit, has done this, and he alone must receive glory." Let's never forget that truth. If we do, it will be to our great detriment and perhaps the end of his work among us. God's work is done by his Spirit. Second, we see that God's work often begins small.

God's work often begins small

After this vision, Zechariah tells us, "Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.' These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth" (vv. 8-10).

As Zechariah receives this vision and this word in verses 8-10, the Lord is not ignorant that the work doesn't seem that impressive. The very laying of the foundation provoked weeping from those men who'd seen the first temple. Perhaps even in the moment of this vision, they still felt a long way from completing the temple. But the Lord was going to do it. The fact that it seemed small and insignificant now shouldn't be seen to suggest that great things couldn't happen. The Lord had made sure that Zerubbabel would lay the foundation, and he was going to make sure that he also completed the construction of the temple.

That is clear, but there are a couple of elements that are perhaps confusing. First, what is the plumb line? Well, this was a line to make sure a wall was straight. In other words, things weren't stopping with the foundation. People would see Zerubbabel bring about the construction of walls as well. The temple was going to be complete.

What then about the seven eyes of the Lord? Well, at the very least, this suggests that God sees all and knows all. In other words, the Lord isn't saying, "It seems that this could happen." He's saying it *will* happen. He is omniscient and omnipotent. But I think it might suggest something even stronger.

Years earlier, when Asa was king of Judah, he'd begun his reign in a godly fashion, relying on the Lord, ridding the land of idolatry, and was blessed. But near the end of his life, he began to turn from the Lord and trust in human alliances. Even when he was diseased in his feet, he still refused to seek the Lord and simply turned to physicians. And as the Lord rebuked him through the prophet, he noted that by turning away from the Lord, Asa was only hurting himself because, "The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him" (2 Chron 16:9). And this may be the reference here. The Lord may not simply be saying, "I see all and know all, and I can say with certainty this will be accomplished" but also, "My eyes range throughout the whole earth, and I've seen one whom I want to strongly support in Zerubbabel, and that's why this will be accomplished." Either way, the Lord is telling them not to despise these small beginnings. The Lord's work often begins small but grows into something great.

I mentioned that William Carey didn't see a convert among the Indians for six years. Things began to turn the next year. A man named Krishna fell and dislocated his shoulder. Carey found him and was able to direct him, interestingly, to the surgeon who'd come with him, John Thomas. But before he did, he shared the gospel with him. When Krishna finally made his way to Thomas, he proclaimed, "I am a great sinner. But I have confessed my sin and I am free!" Carey baptized

him on December 28, 1800. Fruit of Carey's labors started with one convert, seven years after his arrival in India.

Krishna was the first Hindu convert, but he wasn't the last. Having waited for seven years to see his first convert, baptized the last Sunday of December in 1800, Carey was able to witness the conversion of many more in the following years. He wrote to Fuller in August of 1801, "Since the date of my last to you we have baptized . . . five others." He wrote to Ryland in August of 1802, "We have now a Church of 25 members . . . 13 Natives and 12 Europeans—and we have great hopes of several more."¹ By 1811 he wrote that they had baptized 61 persons in that year alone. By 1813 he sent word to Fuller again that more than 500 had been baptized. And "by 1821 the missionaries had baptized over 1,400 new Christians, more than one-half of them Indians."² God's work often begins small. Stories like this could be told repeatedly, by us here and by those whom we've seen out to plant and pastor. And it's a reminder to us that we must not despise the day of small things, for God is often pleased to begin his work in such ways—no doubt because it abounds more to his glory. And, finally, we are reminded in our text that God's work is sustained by his Word.

God's work is sustained by his Word

In the last few verses of our text, we see that Zechariah wants to return to the vision of the lamp and olive trees that we saw in verses 2-3. He asks the angel, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" In fact, he asks him twice, zeroing in on a particular part of the trees the second time, asking, "What are these two branches of the live trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil [i.e. golden-colored olive oil] is poured out?" (vv. 11-12). And again, after a follow-up conversation where Zechariah assures the angel he doesn't know what these are, the angel answers him, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (v. 14).

Now, interestingly, the angel's answer doesn't help us at first glance, does it? I mean, I doubt any of us hear the angel's answer in verse 14 and go, "Oh, I see." Rather, we're asking, "What does he mean by the anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth?" And you may not be surprised to learn that there's serious debate among commentators on this question.

Some suggest that these two "anointed ones" represented by the two branches of the olive trees are Zerubbabel and Joshua. And there are two reasons for this. First, in the Old Testament both kings and priests would be anointed with oil, and since Zerubbabel is a governor but the legal heir to the throne if Judah's throne was still functioning and Joshua was the high priest, then these are two likely candidates. Second, they're the central figures in the last two visions. In

¹ Terry G. Carter, ed., *The Journal and Selected Letters of William Carey* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), 109-10.

² Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1991), 132.

chapter 3 the vision is focused on Joshua, and this one is focused on Zerubbabel, and so since they're both in the immediate context, they're the likely references. If that's the case, the Lord is saying that he'll provide what the people need for the rebuilding of the temple by giving them Zerubbabel and Joshua to lead the way. And that's an encouraging message. But there's another position on this, and it's one I favor.

The angel could be telling Zechariah that the two anointed ones are the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. Why do I say that? For a few reasons. First, the phrase translated "anointed ones" is literally "sons of oil." That could mean the oil is poured out on the sons, like an anointing. Or, the oil could be coming from or through the sons. And I think it's likely that it's the latter, and the symbol is not of two anointed ones but of two through whom God's oil is coming to his people to supply what is needed to guide his people. Second, the angel mentions that these two "stand by the Lord of the whole earth," and the prophets were the ones regularly pictured as standing in the Lord's presence. After all, they were given God's words to speak to God's people. Third, this same imagery comes up in Revelation 11. There, John sees a vision where he sees "two olive trees and . . . two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (Rev 11:4), which sounds almost exactly like what we see here. And there, we're told that they represent two witnesses who "will prophesy" (Rev 11:3). That is, they're prophets. And so, if this same imagery represents prophets there, it likely represents the prophets here. And, finally, Haggai and Zechariah are indeed used of the Lord to aid and support the people in the completion of the building of the temple. When Ezra records the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple, he writes, "Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them" (Ezra 5:1-2).

Now, if that's the case, and the branches of the olive trees represent the prophets, then what the Lord is saying is that he'll sustain his work by his Word as it is delivered by the prophets. And it's not only true that the Lord sustained his work by his Word in the sixth century B.C., but he's always sustained his work by his Word.

Therefore, it's not enough that we remind ourselves that every good thing that happens among us is done by the Spirit of God so that he gets glory, even in things that begin small. It's also crucial that we tie ourselves to the Word of God as the centerpiece in all we do as if his life-giving Spirit is flowing to us through and by his Word. Just as we noted that if we fail to recognize this is all the work of God and he gets all glory could spell our demise, so will turning away from his Word and reliance upon it.

William Carey went seven years before seeing one convert. Talk about small beginnings. Thirteen years later, more than 500 had been baptized. How? Obviously, it was by the power of the Spirit of God. But what specific means were used? Interestingly, it was the translation and dissemination of the Bible among the Indians. Once Carey even found his way to a remote village, and as he began to preach to them, they told him they'd been waiting for him to come

and tell them about Jesus. And as they saw his confusion, they went and brought to him a book that had made its way into their village—it was a New Testament translated into their language by Carey. By the time Carey died, the Scripture had been translated into over forty languages and dialects. The Lord had laid the foundations to bring many into his kingdom.

In 1834, at the age of seventy-three, Carey died. At his request, the inscription on his tombstone read, “A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall.” That’s the heart that must be echoed by all the Lord’s people. After all, it is not by our power or might but by his Spirit working through his Word that all things are done, even when they start small. A few hundred years later, Jesus of Nazareth gathered around him twelve men, who through the power of his Spirit and proclamation of his Word, turned the world upside down. And for us who believe, he turned our lives upside down, so let’s come and thank him now as we come to the table. Amen.