

## Big Things and Small Things

### Some thoughts on Zechariah 4:6-10

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was a century of big things. It all began with the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. This boat was 882.5 ft. long; almost the length of three football fields! That's a big thing! There has never been a ship like her in history or lore. Historians say her disaster signaled the end of the optimism of the last century, and began the pessimism of our closing 20th Century. In her wake were W.W.I, the Great Depression, W.W. II, "the bomb", JFK's assassination, and the more recent funeral of Princess Diana which captivated the whole world. These are very great events indeed.

It is interesting to note that Zechariah lived in a century of "Big Things" as well (6th Cent. BC). Babylon, that great legendary city of the ancient world, destroyed Jerusalem. The Davidic Dynasty was almost 400 years old at this time, and Solomon's temple was one of the oldest and most famous monuments of the ancient world ... now all rubble! This was big news! Approximately 50 years after this, the Persians brought down the mighty Babylonian Empire. Babylon was so great, and its history and culture so extensive, that it has become the most famous city of antiquity; its fall was a great thing! This left the mighty Persian empire. It was so huge that it extended from the Indus valley in India all the way through modern day Turkey, and included Egypt to the South. This is a very big thing!

Right in the middle of this vast empire was a very small thing: the broken heap of stones which once was Jerusalem, and a grim group of Jewish squatters trying to eke out a living as virtual slaves to their great conquerors. These people were tired, living on survival mode, supporting families. These people were poor and harassed by their enemies. These people were weary of listening to their prophets who prophesied great things when in fact nothing grand ever seemed to happen. Their temple project seemed small and

uninspiring. It is within this scenario that Zechariah emerges and asks his grand, yet annoying, question ... Who has despised the day of small things?

## THE BIG THINGS

There are no end to big things in this world. This was true in Zechariah's time, and it is true in ours. Moreover, there is no end for our love and interest in them. Why is this? Why are we so enamored with the big events, the big people, the big institutions, and the big deals of this world? Truth be known, it is because we are so small. We are so ashamed and embarrassed by our own insignificance that we seek to escape from ourselves by latching on to big things!

Was this not the case with Israel? Israel was small potatoes from the beginning. This is true; nothing can change this fact! God didn't feel the need to send them to a psychiatrist to convince them otherwise. In fact, He is deeply concerned that they will forget the obvious (Deut. 7:1-2, 7-8)? Why? Like many small things, Israel felt uncomfortable with their smallness. In fact they grew to hate the truth and began to live in a fantasy ... a fantasy of greatness. It is evident that God blessed little Israel so that all the nations might see how great their God was. As it turned out, Israel preferred to abandon God and live out their own fantasy about themselves.

Things have not changed from Israel to the church! St. Paul begins his mighty Epistle of I Corinthians with these simple questions - scanning his audience he asks: Where are the wise/smart among you? Where is the scribe/scholar? Where are the great debaters and earth changers (I Cor. 1:26-31)? No! They are not among us! They are at the great universities; they walk the great halls of power, not the aisles of our churches! In fact, Paul calls himself and his followers fools - weak - low - despised ... at least in terms of this world's standards! Why? God doesn't prefer big things ... they get in the way of reality! If you are reading this article now, chances are that you are a very small thing; at least in the world's eyes!

So as not to offend you, I offer myself as an example. I come from wonderful and godly family, but it was blue collar background. My folks had little education, and there were very few books around the house. In the first grade I was placed in the smart class. It only took a couple of weeks for them to realize their mistake. I had to take remedial math courses to pass into Jr. High. With my poor SAT scores, I barely got into Bethel College. At seminary, I had to study twice as hard as others to get equal or lower grades. By God's grace, I got into a doctoral program, but the first thing my advisor said to me when he realized what he was in for was "You do not know how to think!". During the ensuing six years of Hebrew tutorials, he became my professor Higgins, and I his Liza Dolittle!

Brothers and sisters, I'm slow of mind, slow of wit, a slow reader, and plagued with a poor memory. Moreover, I am not an athlete, and was never popular ... always the furthest thing from cool. I didn't even get good enough grades to qualify as a nerd! I stand before everyone a very small thing! Why do I stand at all? I have a great God! Much of His greatness has got to do with the fact that He is partial to small things like myself. Am I embarrassed at my smallness? To tell the truth, sometimes I am. I fight the fact that I am so small! I want people to think I am something big, something important, something profound ... I want to be acknowledged and affirmed. In my more sane and holy moments, however, I rise up and embrace the truth! *I am a very small thing! You O God, are very great!*

### THE SMALL THINGS

I would like to make a proposal now: rather than be embarrassed about our smallness and insignificance, let us celebrate it! Rather than be threatened by our smallness, let us seek to understand it! Rather than despise the day of small things, let us embrace it! Why? Why should we do this? Because it makes room for God to work!

Let's look at Zechariah's word to Zerubbabel, who was a prince without a kingdom, a seeming puppet in the face of the great Persian Empire, with the great task of rebuilding what was torn down! "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." (see Zech. 4:6&7). Now he could either despair before the great mountain of impossibilities before him, despise his smallness, and go home and build his own house, or he could embrace his smallness and open himself up to the powerful movement of God's Spirit!

Evidently, Zerubbabel chose the second of these possibilities. In fact, he may even have found himself profoundly intrigued by the grand contrast between his mediocrity, and God's greatness. And so it is, the smaller one seems to oneself, the bigger God becomes. What a liberating place to be! No longer do we have to mask our limitations, our foibles, weaknesses ... they no longer are the problem! They no longer get into the way!

The Apostle Paul had a limitation, a problem, a "thorn in the flesh", (whatever it was), and asked God to take it away. God's simple response was "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness". Paul took this insight to heart, and even began to boast in his weaknesses, displaying them before the world so that everyone would see the power of Christ (II Cor. 12:8-10).

I am a seminary teacher. The most profound preparation I have to make before every class is to present myself as I really am, and not to be something I'm not. The students must see that I do not know everything, that I am not the most articulate person around, and that I am not smoothest personality. They must see me as the mortal heap that I am! It is only then that God is seen for what He is! Only then do I leave room for God to work. I know when I have succeeded when I leave the class deeply cognizant of the fact that I am a very small thing, and the room is filled with the supernatural presence of God. Thomas Merton once wrote, "It is, therefore, a very great thing to be little, which is to say: to be ourselves."

The fact is that God accomplishes far more than we ever think through the small things of our small lives. Zerubbabel finished the Temple project, and when it was complete, many were disappointed. But that Temple was a big thing to God. In it He again met with His people, and it was in this place, almost 500 years later, that Jesus came and told us about His Kingdom, passionately driving out money changers from His Father's house. At the southern steps of this temple the first Christians assembled themselves when the Spirit came down on them at Pentecost, and it was there that many of them were baptized. Zerubbabel's little project became the base from which God launched His world-wide kingdom project!

And this is what He is doing through us and our small things; the smallest things that we do can eventually have huge implications. In God's economy, there is no such thing as a small thing! Some small seeds are sown and sprout many years later. Every Christian, all of us, no matter how small or feeble, are involved in great things beyond our comprehension. Every small act, no matter how insignificant, has mega potential for greatness. We just need the eyes to see this!

### GOD AND SMALL THINGS

Why is God so intent on small things? Well, it is because God Himself is as small as He is big! God is not only the greatest of all, but He is the smallest of all. He not only fills the universe, He hides in the tiniest atom. He is not only the proudest of beings, but also the humblest! We readily talk about the greatness of God, but what about the smallness of God? It is here that we meet Jesus! St. Augustine wrote:

Cure pride and there will be no more iniquity. Consequently, that the cause of all diseases might be cured, namely, pride, the Son of Man came down and was made low. Why art thou proud, O man? God, for thee, became low. Thou wouldst perhaps be ashamed to imitate a lowly man; at any rate, imitate the lowly God ... I

[Jesus] came humble, I came to teach humility, I came a master of humility ... he that keeps not humility is far from the master of humility (Commentary on John).

As far as worldly standards, Jesus' life and death were small potatoes - even a failure. If the Spirit of Jesus hadn't come at Pentecost, no one would have noticed Him much . Think of that! Who is smaller than Jesus, that Master of Humility? What smaller individual shook the world so profoundly?

Let us, therefore, be like our Master. We will find that He meets us in the very depths of our smallness. He is there with mothers who spend never ending, tedious hours with little children, feeling worthless. He stands next to those who never attain their career hopes, and are ashamed. He sits in the silence among aging folk who are becoming more and more marginalized in a world that only notices the young and energetic. Whatever your situation, God is calling to you right now. He is asking you not to flee your smallness, not to be ashamed of it. Let us labor for freedom from the tyranny of the big thing ... then, and only then, shall we discover true greatness!