

'By My Spirit' (Zechariah 4)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church's main concern is to be a testimony to God's glory, which can only be established, confirmed, and perfected by the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Ezra 1:3, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 5:16, John 14:13, Romans 8:30, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Ephesians 3:21, 1 Peter 4:14, Revelation 21:3

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "God's Glory"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the divine testimony of God's glory is central to the purpose of creation and the Church, as illustrated in Zechariah 4. He explains that throughout history, individuals and nations have been called to bear witness to God's glory, ultimately culminating in the Church, which must rely on the Holy Spirit to fulfill this mission. The sermon highlights that true glory is not achieved through human strength or power, but solely by the Spirit of God, which empowers believers to reflect His glory. Sparks encourages the Church to embrace its role as a vessel for God's glory, reminding that even in small beginnings, God's Spirit can accomplish great things. The message concludes with the assurance that the presence of the Holy Spirit is essential for the Church to be a true testimony of God's glory.

Transcript

Reading: Zechariah 4

The golden lampstand which Zechariah saw was the symbol of the divine testimony, the out-shining of the glory of God. Lying behind all God's activities with men, the very reason for man's creation, is His desire to display His glory. The human race, as a whole, failed to realise this grand design, but the testimony was taken up by individual witnesses, like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and others. In a very real sense the testimony of the glory of God rested on their shoulders; they carried the enormous responsibility of being here on the earth where the enemy had almost entirely succeeded in marring or veiling that glory. These lonely figures were the men who stood for the preservation of that testimony to God's glory. Then the testimony passed from individuals to a nation, when Israel was brought into being to be a corporate vessel of the divine testimony, a people in whom the glory of God could be displayed. Ultimately Israel failed, so the testimony was transferred and passed on to the Church, consisting of Israelites to whom Gentiles were later added. The glory of God certainly blazed up anew in the Church at the beginning. In the course of time, speaking generally, the Church has also failed, and it is not without significance that one of the seven churches of Asia was threatened with an entire removal of its lampstand. The article, however

beautiful in itself, has no significance by its mere form or profession, but only as the light of God blazes out from it. This is what God is always seeking, the display of His glory in and through His people.

The great concern and business of the Church is to be a testimony to God's glory. The one plumb-line which measured Jerusalem was that of the glory of God in the midst (Zechariah 2:8), and this measurement is what matters for us today. The final judgment will be based on the degree of glory found in our lives. Nothing else will be of lasting importance. Those who have lived most of their lives already and perhaps been active for God, still do well to face this challenge concerning God's glory, and those who are only just beginning should know the real standard for all Christian living. We may well wonder how it can be. Zechariah had the same problem in his day, and this vision gave him - and us - the answer: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts".

GLORY IN THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST

The only true Witness is the Lord Jesus Christ. Through all those early individual witnesses, through Israel, and through the Church, all is gathered up into one glorious witness, the Lord Jesus. All who went before Him, pointed on to Him; all those who followed (if there was any true testimony to God's glory in their experiences) took their character from Him; the glory of God is to be found in the face of Jesus Christ. It is there, of course, by the Spirit. The testimony of God was taken up at Jordan, where the Spirit of God came upon Jesus, who was immediately challenged by Satan's offering Him the kingdoms of this world and their glory in exchange for the glory of God. It always happens in this way: man is offered this world's glory in exchange for the glory of God. But by that same Spirit of anointing which had come upon Christ at Jordan He met the challenge, and He never swerved from the straight path of seeking only the Father's glory.

It was often a trial, a fiery trial for Him, but the Spirit sustained Him and kept the testimony untarnished. Later Peter interpreted the fiery trial of fellow disciples as being connected with this same Spirit's work of glorifying God, "The Spirit of glory... resteth upon you" (1 Peter 4:14). How can it be that in suffering and adversity the Spirit of glory, not of grace only but of glory, rests upon us? It can only be because the same Spirit who came upon the Lord Jesus to enable Him at great personal cost to glorify God, has now come to our lives for this express purpose of establishing and maintaining the testimony. Wherever you find the Holy Spirit coming, whether in symbol or in reality, you will find that the immediate outcome is always the glory of God. So it was that the tabernacle was filled with God's glory. The temple, also, was filled with this glory. At Pentecost the Spirit came in fullness to the Church, and the result was glory. That day was a wonderful day of glory for the men who had such a living experience of God being glorified in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, and the days following were equally wonderful as every new touch of God's Spirit upon them brought fresh evidence of God's glory.

Although we accept the fact of Christ's eternal sonship, we are told that as Son of man He was enabled to glorify the Father by means of the anointing Spirit. From the beginning of His public testimony to its completion when He offered Himself through the eternal Spirit, He carried through triumphantly His Spirit-given testimony to the glory of God. As representative Man, He lived and suffered for the one purpose of glorifying God, and so perfectly fulfilled this task that in Him the testimony to the glory of God has been secured forever. So, then, our fears and sense of weakness must not cripple us, for He has sent His Spirit into our lives so that in us, too, the testimony might be maintained and the glory seen. We can claim the promise, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit".

This also gives us the answer to the interrogation, "Who hath despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). Out of the large numbers who went into exile, just forty-two thousand odd were ready to pay the price of letting go the comforts and security of life in Babylon to return to the land where God's testimony could be established. They were small in number, weak in themselves, despised by their neighbours, and they returned to a land which was desolate, impoverished and afflicted, so that it was indeed a 'day of small things'. But they were not to be despised, for God was backing them up as they truly sought His glory. It is no small thing to be involved in the testimony of God's glory. We should not make a virtue of smallness, as though there were something important about being despised by others, but at the same time we shall find that whenever God has called people to display His glory, He has chosen those who have no glory in themselves.

God has always been obliged to strip His instruments of their own glory. A Moses, full of Egypt's sufficiency, must go for forty years to the backside of the desert to be emptied out and made to confess his complete inadequacy before he can become an instrument for the display of the glory of God. There were times when some of the Israelites did try to despise this now humble Moses, and he made no attempt to stand up for himself, but God soon made it manifest to all concerned how wrong it was to despise him. The glory of God appeared at the gate of the tabernacle and took up the challenge. Sometimes it takes the Lord years to get us sufficiently emptied, weak and small, so that we can bear His glory in our lives, a fact which may well explain some of His dealings with us. When He has got us small enough and empty enough, then there is a chance for the working of His Spirit in glory.

GLORY IN THE HEART

The testimony to the glory of God must of necessity be a heart matter. Ezra tells us that when Cyrus made his decree that the house of God should be re-built in Jerusalem and every facility be granted to those who would return to do the building, he did not make it a command that all Jews should go back. Had he done so, they would all have been compelled to return, and such compulsion would have given little prospect of glory for God. The decree was really an appeal for volunteers, "Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go..." (Ezra 1:3). Like the original work of the tabernacle, it was entrusted to those who were of a willing heart, for God's testimony will always be a heart matter. Those who have personal interests in view are entirely out of keeping with the objective of God's kingdom and glory. So it was that only a comparative few returned to the land when the opportunity arose, the great majority having settled in and largely become a part of the life in Babylon where all the glory was for man. Their interests and future was so tied up with that realm that it would have involved a tremendous upheaval to extricate themselves and return to a land of poor and unpopular people with only God as their security and hope for the future. It was because so many were not willing to pay the price that for those who returned it was a day of small things. Nevertheless it was not to be despised - far from it.

The Lord Jesus Himself always stressed this heart aspect of discipleship, pointing out that without the denying of self and the daily taking up of the cross, the kingdom could never be fully possessed. The end which God has in view is something much more than mere personal blessing. He is looking for those who will share with His King the responsibility for the glory of His kingdom. Such a calling will find us out if we have personal interests, for it demands hearts which are consumed with jealousy for the glory of the Lord. The Holy Spirit will always support such an attitude, for He Himself burns with the same intense jealousy. This has nothing to do with a craving for special teaching or mere negative dissatisfaction with things as they are, but signifies a real heart hunger for more of God's glory. I am not referring to the people who are eternally disgruntled and full of criticism, those who will never be contented anywhere at all; but I wish to

concentrate on the believers whose hearts are really groaning in travail for the full will of God. Such people sense that there are divine purposes which are not being realised, and they are on full stretch for a testimony of greater glory for God. It was a similar concern which stirred men's hearts to obey the decree of Cyrus. The Jews who remained in Babylon were not without God's blessing, but the remnant were full of concern not for themselves but for greater glory for the name of the Lord, and this made them ready to rise up and leave everything, if only that could be realised. To them - and to us if we are their spiritual counterpart - the promise is most reassuring, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit". We cannot pay the price, nor go through with all that is involved, in our own strength. We do not have to. The Holy Spirit is ready to take full responsibility for the glory of God, both in our own lives and also in the testimony of God through us.

GLORY IN THE CHURCH

The message of Zechariah's vision is that the testimony of God, which is the glory of God, can only be established, confirmed and perfected by the Holy Spirit. The testimony of God is not a teaching, a system of truth, but an experience in life. We must be very clear about this, for we may have a great grasp of doctrine, knowing all the explanations of divine things, and yet miss the essential, which is spiritual glory. It may be true that divine glory will require sound teaching and correct order, yet these in themselves may constitute a dry technique, a mere framework, an empty shell. It is true that the tabernacle was constituted and constructed according to God's own commandments, even down to the last pin, but it did not and could not function until the glory of God came into it. Again, the temple's plans and arrangements were given by God in a detailed pattern, yet it stood empty and valueless until the glory of God filled it. The testimony is not technique; it is glory. What a sad thing it is when would-be upholders of God's testimony are legalistically and meticulously pre-occupied with people's procedure, and even their dress and appearance, carrying heavy burdens themselves and imposing those burdens on others, when what God wanted was just a chance to display His glory.

It is possible, of course, to argue that just as the Old Testament insisted on correct form before the glory came, so in New Testament days the coming of glory will be dependent on careful insistence on right doctrine in the strictest correctness as well as on a perfect form of procedure, but surely Pentecost was the other way round, so far as men here on earth were concerned. In heaven, it is true, everything was perfectly according to God in Christ, and that was how the glory came down to the Church here on earth; but so far as the disciples were concerned, the doctrine and the procedure followed. The Church began with the glorious fullness of the Holy Spirit. Because of Christ's exaltation the glory was available, the anointing Spirit was released. The Church's experience was that it was the dynamic which came first, so that it was after they had the glory that they began to know what they should teach and how they should act. We must have it this way. It must be 'by My Spirit'. We can do nothing about the testimony until God acts. I cannot help to glorify God; you cannot help either; nothing that we can prescribe or provide can do it. The most perfect order will not bring glory. The most correct teaching will not ensure it. It does not come by our abilities, our understanding, our personality or drive, for nothing from man can produce this glory - it is only by God's Spirit.

The glory is itself a testimony. If we are bringing in the glory, people will want to know how they can get it. What is the use of answering them with the 'Thou shalt's' and the 'Thou shalt not's' of legalistic teaching when they find no glow, no radiance, no power, but only an empty shell? The plumb-line which will show up their deficiencies is not that of Christian ideas or religious practices but the testimony of the glory of God in Christ. We begin with the glory; the whole emphasis is as positive as can be - glory by the Holy

Spirit. The only negatives in this verse are connected with the futility of human power and ability.

As we have said, the testimony of God here on earth is to be found in the Church. This is variously described as God's house, God's temple and Christ's body, but in each case the essential factor is the indwelling Spirit. This is really what is meant by the phrase, 'the glory of God', namely the reality of His presence. The vessel of Testimony has as its sole object the making immediate and actual of the presence of God and fellowship with Him. Of course God is everywhere, and can be met anywhere, even in the most isolated and remote spot a man can encounter God. The Scriptures indicate, however, that God has a wish for something more immediate than His universal presence. They speak of God dwelling with men; making His habitation among them; and then they describe the final triumph in the words, "The tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them" (Revelation 21:3). This is something more immediate and actual than the all-pervading fact of the deity, and so the Church has as its object the presencing of God in a more personal and conscious way for the purposes of His fellowship with man.

This is what the Holy Spirit has come for, to make the presence of Christ a vital reality. The titles of 'house' or 'temple' are mere finger-posts, all pointing towards the person of the Lord Jesus. His very name, Christ, means the Anointed One, and it is by the anointing of the Spirit that God is present. The Lord's name is not only 'Jesus'; it is also 'Emmanuel', God with us. Christ is the true house of God, but since we are 'in Christ', we share in the reality of God's glorious presence.

So it is part of the Spirit's work to build us and hold us together so that there may be a united testimony to the glory of God. God needs something more than a heap of stones - even if they are living stones - if He is to have a properly constructed dwelling. Christ needs more than many members, even though they are living members, since a body can only function if its members are coordinated and integrated in vital relationship. Now although there are many members there is only one anointing; we either share His anointing or we do not know its power. The anointing upon Christ is the same anointing as that which we receive, and in us as well as in Him its one purpose is to express God's glory.

It is the anointing Spirit who makes the Church to be the house of God, and the house is one because Christ is one. We must never be caught in the mistake of imagining that those who hold the truth of the one body are more in the reality of it than those who do not. Those who know nothing of the teaching are as much part of Christ's body (if they are in Him) as those who feel that they have received so much light on the subject. We must beware of the schisms which come because of the things which we know and others do not, for light alone can easily cause divisions. "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). That was a challenge made to the church whose members were so ready to boast of their knowledge and so partisan in their attitude to various spiritual teachers. These were the very people whom the apostle described as being a temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16), and also warned very solemnly against destroying that temple. How is the temple destroyed? It is by trying to divide Christ, by making parties and groups among the Lord's people, often by wrongly imagining that they are superior to other Christians because of the teaching they have received or the teacher whom they follow. This is an offense to the Holy Spirit, and a sure way of thwarting God's desire to show forth His glory. The Lord Jesus has so identified Himself in the Spirit with all who are His own people, that what is true of Him is also true of them, and what is done to them is really done to Him. So it is that practical love towards any of His members opens the way for His Spirit's working and, conversely, carelessness, indifference or antagonism towards other members of Christ is a sure way of quenching the Holy Spirit. It may be that this is the explanation of there being so much less glory among God's people than there ought to be. The moment we grieve the Spirit, we begin to dim the glory. It is in their life together that God's people form the golden lampstand into

which He will pour the golden oil through His own golden pipes. Let us not accept any less objective than God's glory when we seek His fullness, for the Holy Spirit's presence among us is specifically promised for the express purpose of providing a testimony to that glory. God's negatives ("not by might, nor by power") are but to make way for His glorious positive - "but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts."

From "Toward the Mark" Nov-Dec 1972.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/by-my-spirit-zechariah-4/>

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