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The vision of the lamps and the olive trees. Who is the greatest?

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 4. And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who was awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, What do you see? I said, I see and behold a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl, and the other on its left.

And I said to the angel who talked with me, What are these, my lord? Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, Do you not know what these are? I said, No, my lord. Then he said to me, 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 topstone amid shouts of grace, grace to it.

Then the word of the lord came to me, saying, The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house. His hand 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. Then I said to him, What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? And a second time I answered and said to him, What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out? He said to me, Do you not know what these are? I said, No my lord.

Then he said, These are the two anointed ones who stand by the lord of the whole earth. Zachariah chapter 4 continues the night visions of the prophet Zachariah. Up to this point in the book he has had four different visions.

The visions of the riders among the myrtle trees in the deep, the vision of the four horns and the four craftsmen, the vision of the man with the measuring line and then the vision of the re-clothing of Joshua the high priest in the preceding chapter. That vision was focused upon Joshua as the high priest and now the fifth vision particularly focuses upon Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah and also the heir of David. The visions of Zachariah more generally relate to the rebuilding of the temple and the re-establishment of the nation.

For all the people's building it would be of little effect were the lord not with them. In these visions however it is revealed to Zachariah that the lord is re-establishing the people. He is going to raise up his throne in Jerusalem once more.

He is going to establish his rule in the world. He is going to extend his kingdom and surround and protect his faithful people. He is going to cleanse the priesthood and now in this chapter he is going to empower his people and their rulers.

This vision begins with Zachariah being awoken which might suggest as Mark Boda argues, the opening of a new section in the vision reports. James Jordan sees a journey through a night within the visions and this is the turning point at midnight. Zachariah sees a vision of a lampstand of gold.

It is difficult to work out exactly what the lampstand looked like. There was a lampstand of course in the tabernacle and there were ten lampstands in the temple. The lampstand in the tabernacle is described in Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 40.

You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work. Its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes and its flowers shall be of one piece with it.

And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it, three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower on the other branch, so for

the six branches going out of the lampstand. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand. Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold.

You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamp shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made with all these utensils out of a talent of pure gold.

And see that you make them after the pattern for them which is being shown you on the mountain. We should not presume that the lampstand in Zachariah chapter 4 is the same in appearance as that within the tabernacle or the temple. The shape of the lampstand in Zachariah's vision is most probably very different from the lampstand described in the book of Exodus, although the symbolism is clearly related.

We see commonalities in the seven lamps and in the construction of the lampstand of pure gold. But beyond that they are quite different. There are seven lamps with seven spouts.

Part of the challenge that we have here is working out the meaning of the key terms and then developing some picture of how it actually looked. David Peterson, working in part from archaeological evidence of lamps from the region, suggests that we should think of each of the lamps as likely holding seven wicks, each with its own channel, spout or pinched lip in the bowl holding the oil, so that each of the seven lamps would contain seven lights. We should probably think then of one large bowl with seven smaller bowls around it, each with pinched lips or indentations within which a wick would be draped, which could be lit.

The whole thing would give a great deal of light. Zachariah's lampstand might have looked more like a birdbath in shape, with seven sevenfold lamps around it, than with the way that the lampstand of the temple is commonly imagined, an image that is drawn in part from the representation of the menorah on the arch of Titus in Rome. As Peterson notes, Zachariah's lampstand makes no mention of branches, for instance.

The lampstand in the tabernacle has cups instead of a bowl and it doesn't have channels in the way that Zachariah's does. The lampstand in the tabernacle draws heavily upon arboreal imagery, but Zachariah's does not to the same degree. There is no connection to almonds, for instance.

The fact that the lampstand has 49 lights should not escape us. 49, seven times seven, is a number that is significant as it's connected with Jubilee. Numbers associated with Jubilee, 25, half a Jubilee, 49, the number of years that would pass before the Jubilee, and then 50, the year of Jubilee, are all numbers that are repeated within Ezekiel's vision

of the Restoration Temple.

Solomon's temple took the original lampstand of the tabernacle and multiplied it by ten, having five on each side. But this is a sort of a glorified or Jubilee lampstand, seven times seven. We see related imagery of course at the beginning of the book of Revelation with the seven golden lampstands, presumably lampstands with seven branches.

As in the lamps of Zachariah's vision, each of the seven is seven-fold. We can see a sort of Russian doll or perhaps fractal pattern here. As you zoom in more closely the pattern repeats on a smaller level.

The lamb, for instance, in Revelation chapter 5 verse 6 is described as follows, The seven horns and the seven eyes might remind us of the seven lampstands and the seven lights. The seven lampstands are the seven churches, and then the seven stars or lights are the seven angels of the seven churches. But these have their analogy within the lamb himself.

The lamb's seven-fold glory flows out and repeats itself on a lower plane. We can probably see the lampstand in Zachariah's vision then as representing the people of God as light within the world. Although the lampstand is not tree-like here, it is connected with two olive trees.

Zachariah sees these two olive trees, one on the right and one on the left. Jordan suggests that we should see the lampstand as standing before the Lord, with the olive trees as being on either side of the throne of the Lord, on the right and the left, but above and behind the lampstand. The interpreting angel who guides Zachariah through his visions, just like Gabriel guides Daniel through his visions, asks him the question of whether he understands what he is seeing.

Zachariah does not. It's possible that he understands the fundamental symbolism, but does not understand how it relates to their situation. What we are given next is not so much an interpretation of the symbolism, but an explanation of what its import is.

This glorious and elevated seven-fold lampstand represents something about the way that the Lord will relate to his people, and most especially to their leader, Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel is currently leading the people in this task of rebuilding the temple, a great yet a daunting operation that had been abandoned for almost 15 years, only being restarted a few months previously. To that point, the Jews had faced opposition from their neighbours and been frustrated in their task as a result of it.

The frustration of the people to this point had probably occurred in large part as a result of the guilt of the people that had not yet been taken away. Now, however, as the filthy garments of the high priest that represented the guilt of the people were removed, being replaced with clean garments, the opposition behind it all, Satan the accuser himself,

could no longer be so effective. Zerubbabel and the people would achieve their purpose not through human might, but by the work and the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing that stood in Zerubbabel's way would be sufficient to provide an impassable obstacle. The great mountains of the time might be the political powers in the region, and the greater power of the Persian Empire behind them. In the first of Zechariah's visions, the myrtle trees were in the deep, an image that implied something about the state of the people of God at that time.

They, however, are going to be raised up, the Lord is going to establish them, as it were, on the mountain, and any other mountain that would presume to oppose them would be flattened. Zerubbabel himself will bring forward the top stone of the temple, accompanied by shouts of rejoicing among the people. The exact nature of this stone is unclear.

Mark Boda suggests that it is the beginning stone, the head stone, or the chief corner stone. However, in verse 9 we see that the hands of Zerubbabel had already laid the foundation of the house, something that he had done a number of years previously. Peterson raises the possibility that the stone is the former stone, something that connects the temple with the previous temple that had been destroyed, as part of the rededication.

James Jordan, connecting this with the tin stone that's mentioned in verse 10, speculates that the stone in question was one that was placed above the threshold to the temple. As such, with the two pillars of Jacob and Boaz on either side, it corresponded to the Lord's presence between and above the cherubim. The Lord assures Zerubbabel and the people that the rebuilding of the house will not be a long and drawn out process.

In fact, just as Zerubbabel had laid the foundation, he would complete the building. This would demonstrate the Lord's presence with his people, and also the truth of the ministry of Zechariah. As we also see in both Ezra and Haggai, a number of the people were disheartened as they compared the temple that was being rebuilt with the former temple of Solomon.

The new edifice was much smaller and less impressive by comparison. However, throughout the night visions of Zechariah, as the veil is being removed and we're seeing the work of the Lord, it becomes apparent that though the physical edifice of the temple is much smaller, its spiritual reality is much elevated. The Lord's throne that it symbolises is going to be lifted up in the years that follow.

Many translations speak of the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel. Yet a large number of commentators dispute this reading of the text, suggesting that it should be seen not as a plumb line, but as the tin stone. The question then is raised, what is the significance of this tin stone? Jordan, as I've already noted, sees this as being placed above the

doorway.

Peterson argues that it is most likely a royal signet stone, perhaps a metallic tablet that is placed at a key point in the foundations of the building. The meaning of this action probably wouldn't be that dissimilar to some official or royal unveiling a plaque for a new building. Jordan argues that the seven mentioned in verse 10 relate to this stone.

The stone that he sees as being above the threshold corresponds to the stone of the preceding chapter, which is upon the forehead of the high priest on his turban. Some analogies should definitely be drawn between these two things. However, I don't believe that this is a reference to the stone.

Rather, it's a reference back to the lamp. As Carol and Eric Myers argue within their commentary, what we are given now is an explanation of the meaning of the vision. Zechariah did not understand what the elements of the vision meant, but now they are explained to him.

From the last part of verse 10 to the end of the chapter, we have an explanation of the vision by its elements in order. First the seven lamps, and then the olive trees and their various components. Elsewhere in scripture we see an association between the lamp and the ruler of the people.

In 2 Samuel 21 verse 17 for instance, Then David's men swore to him, You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel. In 2 Kings 8 verse 19, Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever. The imagery of the eyes of the Lord is also found in places like 2 Chronicles chapter 16 verse 9. For 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.

Given the context in which the flowing of the oil is particularly important, some commentators believe that we should understand the eyes here as wells or springs, another meaning of the Hebrew term. These are eyes or springs from which water or oil flows out to the whole earth to give sustenance and strength. While this meaning might not be entirely excluded from the text, it seems far more likely to me that the focus here is upon eyes.

Eyes are means of judgement and rule. They observe and inspect the earth and then cast judgement upon it on whether it is good or bad. We might think of the description of David in 2 Samuel chapter 14 verse 20.

But my Lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth. We might also think of the horses that patrol the earth and report back to the Lord in chapter 1 of Zechariah. Perhaps the king and the people here are being

represented as extensions of the Lord's authority within the world.

The Lord will act and rule through them. The olive trees are then explained in verses 11 and following. In thinking about the two olive trees, one on the right and one on the left, we should probably think of the two great statues of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies in the temple.

And we should also think of the two pillars, Jachin and Boaz, placed at the threshold of the building. As described in 2 Chronicles chapter 3, the wings of the two cherubs in the Holy of Holies reached out and touched each other, forming between them, as Jordan observes, a sort of threshold, with the Lord's presence symbolically situated above that threshold. We then get more details concerning the olive trees than we had in the initial account of the vision.

There are two branches of the olive trees, which are poured out by some means into the bowl of the lampstand. Many regard this means as being two golden pipes. However, Boda and some others translate the verse in a way that makes reference to people who are working upon the tree.

Boda reads verse 12 as follows. Then I responded a second time and said to him, What were the two branches of the olive trees which are in the hands of the two oil pressers, the ones who empty golden oil from them? In this reading, then, the attention is placed far more upon these figures of the oil pressers, not upon the olive trees by themselves. The image of the oil pressing that we have here, straight from the tree, is very similar to the image in the dream of the cupbearer in Genesis chapter 40 verses 9 to 11.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.

Our reading of verse 12 has a lot of bearing upon our understanding of verse 14 and the two figures who are called sons of oil. Many bible translations, as commentators, see sons of oil as an obvious reference to people who are anointed. However, if we've noticed the figure of the oil pressers, it could very likely be a reference to them.

Against the more common traditional reading that sees in this a reference to Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the leader of the people as the two anointed ones, we might see the two anointed ones who stand before the Lord as the prophets who are entering into the divine council, Haggai and Zechariah. It is through their pressing of the oil of the spirit that the oil is fed in to fuel the lamp of the people and their rulers. The lamp perhaps has a specific applicability to Zerubbabel as the heir of David.

Furthermore, as one aspect of the sevenfold pattern, we might observe that in 1 Chronicles 3 verses 19-20, Zerubbabel has seven sons. The twofold witness of the Lord's prophets will equip his people to burn as a powerful light within the world, fuelled by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. A question to consider, how could we unpack the relationship between the two olive trees, the two cherubim in the Holy of Holies, and the two pillars at the threshold of the temple, Jachin and Boaz? Matthew 17-24-18-14 When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma tax went up to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the tax? He said, Yes.

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others? And when he said, From others, Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free. However, not to give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that, and give it to them for me and for yourself.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes. And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven the angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains, and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. The narrative concerning the temple tax at the end of Matthew chapter 17 is a peculiar one. The tax in question seems to be the temple tax because of the amount that was paid, and also because the logic of Jesus' arguments suggests that God is the one

who is levying this tax in some way.

It is a tax that is rooted in the teaching of Moses. In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11-16 there is a law concerning this tax that is given. Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

The shekel is twenty geras. Half a shekel is an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering.

The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel. When you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives, you shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel, and you shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives. This is later used for the temple, for instance in 2 Kings chapter 12 verse 4, or in 2 Chronicles chapter 24 verses 4-7.

After this, Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord, and he gathered the priests and the Levites and said to them, Go out to the cities of Judah, and gather from all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that you act quickly. But the Levites did not act quickly. So the king summoned Jehoiada the chief and said to him, Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the Lord, and the congregation of Israel for the tent of testimony? For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken into the house of God, and had also used all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord for the bales.

Jesus responds to the levying of the temple tax with a teaching about sons and strangers. The sons are those who belong to the house, and what is within the house belongs to them, they will inherit. Jesus has also taught earlier about the way that the priests are exempt from the law of the Sabbath.

As they are engaged in divine service, the law concerning the Sabbath does not apply to them in the same way, and that his disciples were in a similar position. The sons have an access and a privilege that outsiders do not. Jesus is the son, and the people who are his people share in that privilege of sonship.

He could exploit his status, he could insist upon exemption, but he doesn't. He submits to the tax, so as not to cause scandal. However, through the miracle of the fish with the coin, he does so in a way that demonstrates his freedom and his liberty.

He is provided for by his Father, through the creation itself, in a way that symbolizes the Gentiles. He need not insist on his rights, as he serves a Father who loves to provide and will not abandon his children. There are also far, far more important things than money, and picking a fight over money is not really fitting.

Paying an unnecessary or even oppressive tax doesn't worry the free sons as much as

slaves and the strangers scrabbling for security. Our urge often is to insist upon our rights, our privileges, our exemptions, our status, and Jesus challenges that. We can depend upon God.

God will provide for us. And even in certain circumstances, we can allow ourselves to be defrauded, to have someone take our tunic, or to make us walk the second mile, because we know that God is the one that we depend upon. God is the one who will reward us.

God is the one who we look to for provision. Our urge to insist upon our rights, then, is placed into a distinctively unworthy category. This is not what we are about.

We are people who are willing to pay what is required from us. Indeed, we are happy to go over and above, to be those who are imposed upon. If we can avoid causing scandal, if we can avoid placing obstacles before people, we will go ahead and do that.

We will be people who do not force our own rights, do not insist upon our privileges. The money taken from the caught fish by Peter the fisherman pays for the tax. Peter has been commissioned as a fisher of men, and as I've observed in the story of the Gospels more generally, the fish are very much associated with the Gentiles.

This provision of our Father is one that can be provided through the creation itself, through fish. It can be provided through the Gentiles. It can be provided through all these different people that we would not expect.

But God is the Lord of all, and we can depend upon Him. He is a good Father that we look to and we can trust. And as a result, we do not feel that we need to fight all these unnecessary and unseemly fights about money.

God will provide all our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus. And Jesus talks here and in the passage that follows about stumbling blocks. These are obstacles that we set up.

These can be things like hypocrisy or abuse, division or hatred. Those things which, attending our teaching that is good, can cause people to fall astray, to be those who reject the Word of God on account of something in us, or something that we have done. Because we have not adorned the way of Christ, rather we have been those that have been an obstacle within it, that have discouraged people from putting their trust and their lives in Jesus' hands.

And as we do that, we are judged with the sharpest judgment that Jesus has in the Gospels. There are many occasions where there is necessary offence and obstacles. Jesus often speaks about Himself and His mission as an obstacle, as a stone in the way, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.

He is someone who presents all sorts of obstacles for the people who are unfaithful. Things that purposefully make the way of unrighteousness or unfaithfulness or disbelief less pleasant or easy. He is someone who presents all these riddles and difficulties and problems and frustrations.

And yet, we are not to provide those sorts of things unnecessarily. The Temple Tax isn't one of the ways that the Jewish leaders are undermining the Law of God. There will come a time when the Temple is overthrown, but for now, faithfulness requires honouring it.

You don't want to cause scandal in this thing, it's not the most important thing. Refusal to pay the Temple Tax would cause people to stumble, it would give the wrong message. It would be something that might cause people to turn astray from Christ, not to listen to Him.

They would see Him as someone who is opposed to what the Temple represents in its fullest sense, rather than as the one who is fulfilling its true meaning. And so Christ is prepared to forgo His privileges as a Son, to forgo His advantages and His status and His exemption, to be one who does not cause stumbling, who does not cause some weaker brother, some weaker person, to turn away from the path of righteousness or to reject the message of the Kingdom. There are so much more important things than insisting upon our rights in such situations.

This theme of scandal continues into the next chapter. And the question there is who is the greatest? The disciples are jockeying for position, and this is a typical human desire, we want to be exalted over others. And Jesus' response to them is to show a child.

The Kingdom of God does not work in the same way. The Kingdom of God is not about competitive jockeying for honour and privilege and status. The child challenges us to humble ourselves, not to be people who vaunt ourselves over others, who have a strong sense of our superiority.

We are not players of the competitive game of honour that utterly consumes other people's attention and concern. Rather, we recognise our dependence and our unworthiness, and to resist the pursuit to exalt ourselves over others, we must take that posture of the child. Greatness comes through loving service of others, putting others ahead of ourselves.

Greatness also requires a welcoming and a receiving of the weak, a valuing of the weak, and a concern not to be an obstacle or stumbling block to them, even in those things where we do have rights that we could appeal to. We are warned in the strongest of possible ways against putting an obstacle in the way of the weakest. Children are highlighted here.

They are representative of the wider group of weak, independent people. But they are

important in their own right. They are not just symbols of something that they are not.

Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give us anything in return, who might threaten our status, rather than raising it. If you spend time paying attention to and valuing and considering the needs of and protecting children, it's not necessarily going to give you status. Often, the people who are engaged in that sort of activity lose status.

They are not seen as powerful power brokers in society. They are not seen as the sort of people with influence and weight. The way that we treat children and the weak is absolutely key.

It's a critical indicator of the life of the Kingdom. We are being called to follow Jesus' example here. Jesus surrenders his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention, no status that he can benefit from.

And Jesus teaches this again and again in his teaching, that we are to be people who give attention to those who can give us nothing in return, to invite the people who are the outcasts to our feasts, to invite those who have no honour to return to us, to pay attention to the child, to the outcast, to the stranger, to the widow, to the orphan, to the people on the margins of society. And Jesus stresses the importance of dealing most radically with the obstacles to the weak and to the children. This is a connection to Jesus' earlier teaching on adultery in the Sermon on the Mount.

The importance of dealing radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling. If there is something that is causing us to sin, we must pluck it out even if it is our eye or our hand. The fact that there are angels in God's very presence who are interceding for the weak is something that reminds us that they may appear weak but God, who has more power than any other, pays attention to them.

He has charged some of his angels to take special concern for them, to ensure that they are never overlooked or forgotten. This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature and in the law. God sees the orphan and the widow, the weak unnoticed by God himself.

The one who gives to the poor and cares for the poor lends to the Lord. And there is a danger that we have of a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak, that allows the weak to be collateral damage for the achievements of the strong. In Revelation 18, verse 21, there is the recurrence of this image of a millstone and something being cast into the sea.

In that passage it is the fate of Babylon the Great. Why does Christianity receive such a terrible fate? Because they have abused the weak, because they have preyed upon the children of God, because the people that God attends to, those marginalised people,

those people who are dependent upon his care, those people who have no power or honour or glory of their own to offer, they have been abused and mistreated. And God will judge all who act in such a manner.

Jesus here gives the lost sheep parable that is more familiar to us from Luke chapter 15. Christ isn't a saviour who tolerates collateral damage. A few weak people sacrifice for the sake of the strong.

No one in the kingdom of God doesn't matter. The good shepherd will leave ninety-nine strong sheep for the one that is lost. The weak, ill-favoured, blemished sheep, whatever sheep it is, even if it has nothing to commend it, is of concern to the good shepherd.

This challenging passage has a peculiar and powerful relevance to many situations in our own time where we are prepared, perhaps, to sacrifice for the sake of the benefit of the powerful people who are made in the image of God. People who are these lost sheep that God cares for. Children who have angels in God's very presence who are interceding for them.

God cares about the weak. But so often our concern for the strength of our communities, for the power of particularly gifted preachers or teachers or authorities, we're willing to sacrifice a few weak people for that. And Christ teaches that this is utterly opposed to the principle of the kingdom.

The principle of the kingdom is that the child is in the centre. The weak, the dependent, the one without honour, the one without status. And if we are those who will sacrifice them for our gain, our gain as the strong or the powerful or the influential, we have utterly rejected his kingdom.

Rather, we are to aspire to be like them. To be those who give up the gains of status that others play. To give up that concern with honour and supremacy.

And to be those who put others before ourselves. A question to consider. The sort of unnecessary obstacles that we set up for other people walking the way of the kingdom is a chief concern of Christ in this passage.

And maybe we should think about the inverse of these obstacles. The ways in which we can make the way of the kingdom a lot easier to walk for people. We don't want to make the way of the kingdom easier than God has made it.

But we do not dare to make it harder. What are some very practical ways in our various situations that we can make the path of the kingdom easier for others to walk? Also, how can this teaching of Christ in this chapter be related to Paul's teaching concerning the strong and the weak in places such as his letters to the Corinthians and the Book of Romans?