

Haggai 1

Southend Evangelical Church - 25th May 2008

[Bible Quotes from NKJV]

Intro

I've been a Christian for almost seven years – which to some of you might sound like ages, but a lot of you will probably think I'm just getting started. I think you're both right. But, as you can probably imagine, my understanding of God has grown and developed over that time. If you're a Christian, then you can probably identify with that. There's always something to learn.

One of the things which has affected me most over the years I've been a Christian has been the idea of God's glory. For some reason, it doesn't show up in Christian teaching and writing nearly as much as it should. I guess it's partly to do with a dislike for authority - it makes God sound too much like a dictator. But, to be honest, I think that's ridiculous. Christians should be concerned for God's glory – we'll see why as we go. If we aren't, then the picture of God we end up with is bland and confusing (and, dare I say, blasphemous).

I love this chapter of Haggai (*or however you pronounce it – that's how I do*), because it's the perfect antidote to that kind of wrong thinking. It gives us a 'kick' and forces us to ask what priority God's glory should have. We're going to look at three different parties:

- **The Israelites' Concern for God's Glory**
- **God's Concern for God's Glory**
- **Our Concern for God's Glory**

The Israelites' Concern for God's Glory

To understand what's going on, we need to know some of the history which leads up to this point in Haggai. The book isn't in chronological position – it deals with events which are mentioned in the book of Ezra, if that helps. In about 586 BC, the kingdom of Judah was invaded by the Babylonian empire, led by King Nebuchadnezzar. In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed, including the temple Solomon had built. Most of the Jewish people were taken as captives to Babylon, where they lived in exile for decades. Then in 538 BC, Babylon was conquered by the Persians. Their foreign policy was different to that of the Babylonians; they encouraged loyalty by allowing captives to go home and live as part of the empire. So the new king, King Cyrus, allowed the Jewish captives to go home. And the following year, 50,000 Jews returned home.

When they got there, they rebuilt the altar in Jerusalem so they could resume their worship. But then they hit an obstacle when work on the actual temple was banned. Some locals wanted to join in but they weren't allowed, so they wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes telling him that if the building was completed, he'd end up with a rebellion. And so the building was delayed for 16 years.

Which brings us to this point, 16 years later, when God sends Haggai with a message. We don't know much about Haggai. His message is for **Zerubbabel** and **Joshua**. Zerubbabel was the **governor**, and Joshua the **high priest**. Although neither of them was functioning properly – Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David, but he was a king without a kingdom. And Joshua was the high priest, but he was a priest without a temple!

They should have been spurring the people to action, but for 16 years, the Israelites have let this situation continue. Haggai brings God's message into this situation. And right from the start, you can see there's a problem. God talks about "this people" (v2). For hundreds of years these were God's people. You'd expect him to call them, "my people," but instead, he refers to them in a distant, slightly cold way.

We can see what this problem is from the message. Through Haggai, God makes a statement, and he asks a question. He puts his finger on their attitude.

They say, "*The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built*" (v2). It's not the right time for the temple to be built. And then he asks them a question which shows just how misplaced their priorities have become: "*Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?*" (v4)

Do you see what's wrong? The building of the temple has been delayed for 16 years. But, if that wasn't bad enough, they're paying more attention to their own houses than to God's house, making them beautiful. Their **priorities have slipped**. Badly. And this is the situation God directs Haggai to address.

In some ways, it's understandable that they should feel like this – they've got the nations around them breathing down their neck, and they've been ordered to stop building by the great king of Persia himself. So you can sort of understand why they're not enthusiastic to start building. Maybe they were waiting for God to make the first move and make things easy for them – to change the King's mind or remove them altogether. But, actually, the problem is more than that. It's not that they're enthusiastic but thwarted by circumstances - they're *indifferent*. Their passion has gone, and it's been diverted to other things, like their fancy houses.

It's not just houses either – Haggai goes on to explain in verse 6 just what they *have* been living for: things like food and drink, money, clothes. But are they satisfied? No. They **sow**, but without much to show for it. They **eat and drink**, but they're never satisfied. They **wear** clothes, but they're still cold. When they **earn** their wages, it's as if they put them into a bag with holes – however much they earn, it doesn't last. They're never satisfied.

And that's what happens when we try to find our satisfaction in anything other than God. These things will never satisfy us either. We can never have enough. We'll never finish eating, or earning. If you try to reach happiness or satisfaction like that, you'll just never get there. There will always be more to get.

So is there any wonder the Israelites living in Jerusalem never got round to finishing the temple? They were saying, "*The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.*" They were waiting for the right time to get started, but they never quite got round to it. Instead, they concentrated on their own houses, their own security, their own comfort. And they never quite got round to building a house for God.

As we look around, we see millions of people who have ignored God completely, and are trying to find their satisfaction in other things. Maybe some of you here this evening fall into that category. If you do, then let me tell you that you'll never find it – you'll never be satisfied unless you find your satisfaction in God. But is this an attitude that Christians can identify with. I think it is. Remember, these people were God's people, and they'd come back to their homeland, given to them by God. They weren't pagans. They were God's people who'd become indifferent to their God.

How often do we base decisions on how we're to best serve God based on our comfort or security. It makes sense to us to say things like, "we'll do this once we've got enough people in the church" or "I'll give money to that missionary when I've got a bit more." We can do it in our personal lives, and in the church. And it sounds logical. Surely we'll be able to do a better job of serving God once we're comfortable and secure. But what does it say about our priorities?

This kind of attitude also leads us into the trap the Israelites fell into. They never had enough, they were never settled, and if we think in this way, we'll never be sorted either. We'll end up saying, "the time has not yet come." So we might plan to support a missionary once we have enough money, but how much is enough? When will we be comfortable enough to do it? The chances are, if we're trying to find our satisfaction in things like money and food and clothes, then the answer will be **never** – just like it was for the Israelites.

But how does God feel about all this, and why? Well, having looked at the Israelites' concern for God's glory (or lack of it), let's look at...

God's Concern for God's Glory

We can already see that God isn't happy with the situation. Remember that slightly distant greeting in verse 2? God's temple still lies in ruins, nothing more than foundations, while His people concern themselves with other things. But what's the big deal? Does the almighty Creator of the universe really need bricks and mortar? He has a command for them, which shows us what's so bad (v8), "*Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified.*" This was never just about a building. This is about something far more important – **God's glory**.

The temple was a **monument** to God's glory. It was the focal point of Israel's relationship to God, but it was also the focus of God's dealings with the world. And the way it was set up showed just what kind of God they were dealing with. The way the temple was set up, the sacrifices going on, the gold on the walls had all showed that this was a holy, mighty, glorious God.

What did the temple show now? A few holes in the ground, maybe a few stones? What did that say about God, to the Jewish people and to the nations? In forgetting about the temple, what are the people saying about God's glory? What are they saying about his relative importance? *We'll get to God eventually. We've quite busy, but one day we'll squeeze him in.*

Imagine the Queen came to visit you, and she knocked on your door. Would you answer the door and say, "*I'm sorry, I'm a bit busy. I'll let you know when I've got time to see you*"? Of course you wouldn't. If you did, she wouldn't be very pleased, would she? And rightly so – what would you be saying about the importance of the Queen? You'd be saying that there are lots of other things which are more important than her, and you're going to deal with them before you invite her in. And, if you feel like that about her, then the chances are you'll never get round to seeing her.

The Israelites were saying the same thing about God, only it's infinitely worse because God is infinitely more important than the Queen! God is infinitely more important than having a nice house, or earning wages or getting food. And that's the issue – **God's glory has been forgotten**. They need to recover their passion for God's glory. And they can demonstrate that by going and fetching wood and building the temple, so that God **will be glorified** (v8).

This chapter tells us something really important about God, which we often miss. I started to mention this right at the start. If we *do* miss it, then our understanding of pretty much everything we believe as Christians will be wrong. This passage shows us **God's concern for His own glory**.

When you read this, do you think it makes God sound grumpy and jealous – like a spoilt child who starts to make a fuss because He isn't the centre of attention? Well, if it does, then you don't understand God's glory properly.

This is the God who has existed for all eternity, and who created the entire Universe. He made

everything in it, and he sustains everything in it. He is perfect and holy and good. God is worthy of glory! It's right that God is glorified. If I were to stand here and say, "I will be glorified," it would be a horrible thing. It would be horrible because I have absolutely no claim to be glorious. But God does. He's the *only one* who does! God's glory is his top priority – and it should be ours too.

But we don't see that. We lose sight of God's glory, and we can even think that maybe God has an ego problem, when actually we do. The Israelites made other things more important than God, and we can do the same thing, can't we?

You can see God's concern for His glory through the whole of this passage. He's the one who makes the first move and sends Haggai with the rebuke and the command to build the temple. Later on we also read that he's the one who has been frustrating their efforts to look after themselves.

[Read 1v8-11]

He says he blew away what they brought in. And the reason - his house (and his glory) lie in ruins. The droughts, the hardship they've been going through, were all caused by God. He was withholding the very things they were going after, because they were more concerned with stuff than with His temple, than with building a monument to God's glory. Again, unless we see how important God's glory is, then that will seem harsh. But if God's glory is his number one priority, then it makes sense.

This isn't a one-off. Throughout the Bible we see situations where God teaches people about his glory, and it isn't always comfortable (in fact, most of the characters in the Bible had some experience of this). And I think this is another experience we can identify with too. If things are distracting us from our first priority, then we can expect God to show us how important those things really are. He'll use difficult experiences to teach us about what's really important.

When we experience difficulty and suffering, our response shouldn't be to assume that God has made a mistake: "*what are you doing God? Why are you doing this to me?*" Instead, we need to ask the question, "*how will this situation help me to appreciate God's glory more? And how will it help other people to appreciate God's glory?*"

We can also see God's concern for His own glory in the way the people respond. In verse 12 we're told that Zerubbabel, Jehozadak and all the people obey God's message. They feared the Lord – they remembered who it is they're disrespecting by leaving the temple unfinished! Then God sends Haggai with a further message (but the tone is quite different this time) – "I am with you, declares the Lord" (v13). That would have been a massive comfort to them, wouldn't it? In the face of opposition from the people around them, knowing that God was with them would have been invaluable.

And they all get up and build the temple. But, even now, God is still at work. Look at verse 14 – it's God who stirs the spirit of the governor, the priest and all the people! At every step of the process, God is acting so that his glory will be displayed in the building of the temple. He judges their mistake and withholds his blessing. He sends a messenger to explain it to them. He commands them to build the temple, **and** he moves them to respond and to do it. God's concern is for His own glory.

Seeing God's concern should make us rethink our priorities. Which brings me on to my final point...

Our Concern for God's Glory

If God's glory is his top priority, then surely it should be ours too? But then we hit the usual snag with reading the Old Testament – how does what we read there apply to us? How does this connect to our lives? I'm fairly certain none of us are Jews who have just returned from exile in Babylon. So how do we translate the obvious command the Jews received to our situation? Do we have to go and build a temple?

The answer is no, we don't. Things work differently for us. The Jewish people worshipped God in a particular way, in a particular building. Things are different for us because of the Lord Jesus. The Jews would offer sacrifices to deal with their rebellion against God, but now the ultimate sacrifice has been offered. His death was completely sufficient – anyone who trusts him is welcomed into God's family. And instead of dwelling among us in the temple, God dwelt among us in the person of the Lord Jesus, and now the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer. Everything has changed - there is no more need for the temple!

So what is it then. Well it's not a church building. It would be easy to make the comparison: *they worship in a building (the temple) and we worship in buildings (churches, cathedrals etc)*. But I don't think we should read this passage and take it as a command to build the biggest and fanciest church building we can.

The key is that the temple **displayed God's glory**. The question we need to ask is: what does God use now to display his glory?

The answer is **the church**. God uses the church to display his glory, which is a scary thought, isn't it. But we need to take this on board and take it seriously!

If you look at the first chapter of Ephesians, you'll notice the phrase, *“to the praise of His glory.”* Paul explains that the gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ bringing us back to God, is *“to the praise of His glory.”*

The church isn't a monument to God's glory because we're good or special. God hasn't picked us out as the best examples of humanity. This isn't about us – it's about him. The church is a monument to the grace and the goodness of God. It's in the church that the effects of the cross are displayed for all to see. In his holiness and perfection, he dealt with our sin and rebellion, but in his infinite love and generosity he did it in such a way that we could be part of his family. And by his grace we are being built together, united where there used to be division.

The church is a monument to God's glory because it's a monument to his grace!

So when we read Haggai chapter 1, it should drive us to build the church, and to work hard at being church together. To display the glory of God by living in the light of His glorious gospel. We shouldn't neglect the church because other things are more important. If you look at Acts, the early church got this. They shared everything in common – they didn't make themselves comfortable first – their first concern was being the body of Christ together.

There's one other element to this, which I'll finish with. God's glory is displayed in the church. But there's a way that God's glory can be shown even more. And that's when the church grows. God's glory is displayed as people turn to him, as they are saved by his grace and welcomed into his family. God is glorified all the more as those who don't know Jesus hear the gospel and turn to him. We need to take the hint from Haggai and resume building the church.

So God's glory should be our utmost concern too. That means that we shouldn't neglect the church – the body of Christ (whether we meet in a church building or not). And we should preach the

gospel, so that his glorious grace can be displayed to the nations, that he might be glorified.