

Haggai Part Two

A Brief Recap...

Haggai was a prophet ministering in 520 B.C. to the Jews who had returned from Exile in Babylon. His book is structured as follows:

- 1v1-11** – Haggai's first message, to Zerubbabel and Joshua.
 - 1v12-15 – Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people respond.
- 2v1-9** – Haggai's second message, to Zerubbabel, Joshua and the remnant.
- 2v10-19** – Haggai's third message, to the priests.
- 2v20-23** – Haggai's fourth message, to Zerubbabel.

Haggai's first message from God pointed out to the Jews returning from exile that their priorities were all wrong. They had neglected their first love – they had neglected God and His glory. God reassures them that He will be with them, and so they begin rebuilding the temple.

Haggai's second message (2v1-9)

The next message from God, delivered by Haggai, comes just a few weeks later (on the twenty-first day of the seventh month). It is for Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the priest), and all the people (v2). The first part of the message again points out something the people had been thinking, and perhaps even saying. That the new temple is rubbish compared to the old one (“...no better than a cottage,” as Calvin said in a lecture on this passage). It is likely that there are still some people old enough to remember the first temple in all its splendour, before it was destroyed by the invading Babylonians. And when they look at what they are building, it doesn't compare. In Ezra 3v12, we read that many of the old men returning from exile wept when they saw the foundations. Bear in mind they are probably still working on the foundations. They are not looking at the finished article – looking ahead, they cannot see how the temple they are building could ever be good enough. It seems that, after their initial burst of enthusiasm, discouragement has set in. Imagine how it must have felt, remembering the glory of the first temple (a symbol of God's presence and glory) and seeing the new, inferior one.

Do we ever experience this attitude? Do we look back on what God has done in the past and then question the worth of what is happening now?

As Christians, there are times in our lives and in the history of our churches when things seem to have been much better. We read of revivals and huge meetings that happened in the past, and then we look at the world and the church now. And rather than being encouraged by what God did in the past, we are discouraged when we realise things are not like that today.

The Jews are discouraged. But, true to His word in chapter 1, God is still with them. “Be strong,” he tells them (v4). And he tells them to work because He is with them. He encourages them in this, first by looking at the past, then to the future. He says that he is with them “according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.” The promises he made after the first exile (to Egypt) still stand, now that the second exile (to Babylon) has ended. Just as he was with them then, He is with them now. His Spirit remains in their midst (v5).

Then he looks to the future. A day is coming when every part of the earth will be shaken, and every nation will come in, bringing their wealth. All silver and gold belong to Him, He tells them. So as

they look at the temple now, it is not as it is because God lacks the resources to build it. It is not because God is too poor to fund a bigger temple. Rather, He has in view a future where the temple will be more glorious than even the first temple. Notice the scope of His plan – all nations will come in. His glory *will* be restored, and it will be even better than before!

What does this refer to?

It could be the temple being expanded and renovated by Herod. Or it could be a third temple, which Orthodox Jews still believe will be built.

However, I believe it refers to Jesus Christ, and the new covenant He brought in. Jesus described himself as the 'temple' which was torn down and rebuilt in 3 days. The temple symbolises God's presence, and that is achieved ultimately in Immanuel, God-with-us.

Perhaps this is why God had them build an inferior temple – to keep them looking to the superior one, that is, the coming of Christ?

When we look for God at work in the world, we should not use worldly ideas of success (like numbers, size of buildings etc) to judge our success. Instead, we should carry on working faithfully, knowing that God has not changed, and that the relationship with Him which is available in Christ is far superior to any temple. The nations are already coming in, and one day every knee will bow before God, and there will be peace, just as he promised.

Haggai's third message (2v10-19)

Haggai's next message, two months later, is for the priests specifically – the ones who were responsible for leading worship. Remember, worship had been going on since Ezra arrived and rebuilt the altar (Ezra 3). They built the altar first, before anything else. Haggai's third message is about what God thought of their sacrifices (and everything else they'd done since).

He begins with some theological questions. Can something holy make something else holy? The answer is 'no' (v12). Then he asks if something unclean can make other things unclean. The answer is 'yes' (v13). [Think of it like dirt – something dirty makes clean things dirty, but something clean doesn't make dirty things clean.] Once they have answered these questions, Haggai tells them the same is true for them. God has considered them unclean, and everything they've touched has also become unclean, even their offerings. Unclean people can't offer clean sacrifices.

He reminds them of their experiences before they began the rebuilding work. Their blessings were greatly reduced because of their attitude towards God (see 1v6). When they went for food, there was less than there should have been. What little they had was struck with blight, mildew, and hail. But they did not take the hint, and they did not turn back to God. All the while the temple stood unfinished, God's blessings have been withheld. Although they have been offering sacrifices, their hearts have not been right. They have been doing it with the wrong attitude if they have been worshipping God while His house lay in ruins – they cannot have been doing it out of love and respect for God. The important thing is not what they have been doing, but their attitude towards the one they were doing it for!

Do we ever display this same attitude?

This is a stern warning against empty religion. It is far too easy to slip into, and we need not think it only applies to those who use liturgy and ritual. We can even turn going to church or reading the Bible into a ritual, through which we earn God's favour. But it is our relationship with God which brings blessing, and it is our hearts which are important in worship, not our actions. If our hearts

aren't in it, then our worship is pointless and useless (and even offensive – see Malachi 1).

But now they have begun rebuilding, He will bless them. God is merciful to them. Once they turn back to Him, they are forgiven, and He blesses them. He has not held their rejection against them. This has been apparent throughout their history, where we see God's grace in action.

And, of course, God's grace and mercy are supremely poured out in Christ. This passage also teaches us much about repentance, and God's readiness to accept our repentance. God *wants* people to turn back to Him. Even His harsh treatment of the Jews was to bring them back to Him and under His blessing. Again, Christ is the fulfilment of this. In Christ, we can repent and our sin can be dealt with fully and effectively.

Haggai's fourth message (2v20-23)

Haggai's fourth and final message was delivered about four months after he began. This time it is to Zerubbabel alone. Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah under King Cyrus, but he was descended from King David. He was unable to reign properly as king. This was presumably a personal disappointment for him, but it would also have been troubling for the Jewish remnant, as the kingship (and its promised fulfilment) had been so important in their history. God had promised that David's line would rule forever – now it seemed like that was under threat.

God describes, as He did in v6-7, what he is going to do. He will shake the heavens and the earth, and defeat kingdoms and their armies. But, amongst all of that, Zerubbabel will become like a signet ring. It is probably a deliberate reference to Zerubbabel's grandfather Coniah, who had been denounced by God before the exile (God said that, even if Coniah had been a signet ring, he would still have removed him and delivered him into the hands of his enemies - see Jeremiah 22v24). The signet ring of a king, which was often used as a seal on letters and official documents, carried the authority and power of the king. Zerubbabel's line would again carry the authority and power of God. The kingship of David is continuing and is re-asserted in Zerubbabel. He carries God's anointing as King, just as David had. And eventually Christ would complete the line and rule supremely.

The last few words are significant. And it's all by God's sovereign grace. He chose Zerubbabel and was responsible for restoring Him, just as He restored the temple. God ensured that His promised would be kept, even if they looked in doubt to the Jews. And he will continue to keep His promises. So it is fitting that the book ends on that note!

Learning from Haggai

As with many books of the Old Testament, Haggai reminds us of God's sovereign grace in history, leading His people and working for their good (even when they cannot see it). In Haggai we can see God gently but firmly bringing His people into a proper relationship with Him. He challenges their heart attitudes, both their concern for His glory (especially His first and third messages), and the trust they ought to have in His promises (as in the second and fourth sections).

As we look at our own lives, we can see how we fit into the modern equivalents of the bad attitudes the returning exiles were guilty of. We get our priorities in the wrong order; we fall into practicing religion instead of relationship; we fail to understand God's purposes and we question His promises.

But in all of that, we see a God who is gracious, loving, and trustworthy. And one who dearly wants us to have a relationship with Him. He has what was necessary to make this possible, through the events in Haggai, and ultimately in Christ.