

Jerusalem Wasn't Built in a Day

Haggai

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Bible Text: Haggai 2:1-9; Hebrews 12:1-17

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William the Conqueror was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas day, 1066. Westminster Abbey still stands there and if the name is familiar. Well, I hope it is. After all, it was in a chamber just off Westminster Abbey that part of the abbey precincts of which the Westminster Confession of Faith was written.

I mention the coronation of William the Conqueror not because I think you are deficient in the history of the United Kingdom, dating back almost 1000 years, but to illustrate a particular point. Just about every history book that I have ever read that ever touched upon the time of William the Conqueror, certainly growing up as a school boy and learning the history of the nation which God was pleased to set me, mentioned the fact that he was crowned on that day. Never in any of the text books never had I heard it mentioned on any documentary program it says that he was crowned on December the 25th, although, of course, that would be just as accurate. It is always just Christmas day, 1066.

And perhaps you might know that there are folk whose birthdays you find it easier to remember. April [?] his birthday is the fourth of July. Why do I remember her birthday when in all honestly I would have to confess to you readily that the vast majority of the members of this congregation I don't know when your birthday is. I remember April because of the association. For some reason or other the United States enjoys celebrating the day in which I was licensed to preach the gospel. I always remember that it is also April's birthday, too.

The associations aren't so obvious for us, but if we had a better grasp of Old Testament patterns of worship the way in which Haggai introduces this particular portion of revelation of God's Word would be more meaningful for us. He begins and without looking down I might be tempted to ask you which month in which Haggai was speaking? Can you remember which day? No, you are looking down. Stop it. Without looking at your Bibles would you know? You have just heard it read from the pulpit. You have probably followed it through, but it hasn't particularly stuck. But if I ask you now which day of the year was William the Conqueror, your education is being furthered by being at this particular sermon in British history. Which day of year was William the Conqueror crowed on? You all know now. It was Christmas day.

Well, let me just remind you that Haggai is speaking on in the seventh month. And so I want to begin by setting it in its context. It was the seventh month. And the seventh month was something of a busy month for the people of God in Haggai's day. Of course there would be the usual sabbath days on the first, the eighth, the 15th and the 22nd. We are wondering how it is that they always had the sabbath day on the first day of the month. It is because the Hebrew calendar was a lunar calendar and, therefore there were 28 days to each month.

But it is not so much that they had the usual allocation of sabbath days. It was the fact that on the 10th day of the month was the Day of Atonement. And then shortly after the Day of Atonement, from the 15th until the 21st was the feast of the Tabernacles. It was the end of the year. It would be approximately October by the way in which we would reckon the months of the year and the bringing in of the harvest, a week long festival in the rejoicing of God's bounty in the harvest.

Beginning of the third sabbath of the month and continuing for the entire week, the feast of Tabernacles when the people of God would sit outside, weather permitting, and enjoy a week long feasting, the time of harvest.

So when Haggai comes to present the Word of God, he is not just, as it were, on any day of the year. There is a specific association here from Haggai chapter two verse one.

“In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month...”¹

In other words, it was the very climax of the feast of Tabernacles, the great feast, a week long of feasting, the celebration of the bringing in of the harvest at the climax of it, the big day of that feast, the 21st day of the seventh month.

If we wanted to put in our terms we would simply say at the morning worship serviced on Sunday the 17th of October, 520 BC at the conclusion of a week long feasting and fashionable, the tabernacles, Haggai got up to preach God's Word. On the last day of the great festival Haggai preached God's Word.

Now as we come to study God's Word together, we recognize that the people of God had grown somewhat discouraged. There were, no doubt, amongst the older members present something of a remembrance of how things used to be. They could remember the temple in Jerusalem that Solomon had built. They could remember it is something of a wonder of the civilized world, one of the great buildings of the ancient world to be seen from far off, dominating the skyline of Jerusalem. Solomon's reputation had stretched in his terms to the ends of the earth so that kings and princes, so that queens came to visit him to hear the wisdom of his lips.

Jesus himself draws a comparison to Solomon, Solomon in all his glory. And the temple which he had built was befitting of the world's wealthiest monarchs, a temple that was appropriate for God himself.

¹ Haggai 2:1.

Well, as the people of God reflected upon the past and looked back to the hey day, the glorious days of the past and thought about how things had been in a previous generation, David, himself, of course, had been forbidden from building the temple himself, though he had desire to do it. yet God had denied him that particular privilege.

But David, nevertheless, had laid up much treasure over the years and there if we go back into an earlier portion of God's Word you would see how David had laid up a considerable amount of wood in order to build the temple, stones, had laid up vast reserves of funding for it, gold and silver in abundance, bronze to make whatever architect were needed for the temple.

And Solomon himself, having access to many gold mines, covered the building in gold, almost literally. In other words, as the people looked back upon a previous generation they could think about the temple, they could think about that times of preparation for the building of the temple, whether it was Solomon and the labor that was involved there or whether even back before Solomon the time of preparation. They had a great start to build the temple in Solomon's day because they had warehouses filled with gold in order to undertake the work. There were men who were skilled in building huge buildings.

And what did they have in Haggai's day? It wasn't that they had huge stockpiles of lumber or large amounts of massive stones readily at their disposal. Their bank accounts were filled with extra funds just waiting for the opportunity to build the temple again. They had none of the advantages of Solomon either in preparation or in the availability of materials to undertake the work. They looked to the temple site and here was a destroyed temple staring them in the face, overgrown by decades of weeds.

I remember going as a young boy to visit friends in London with my mother and although it was some decades, about the same length of time since the people of God or at least some of them had returned by the order of Cyrus, 20 years or so after the end of the Second World War and yet the devastation wrought upon the city of London by the Luftwaffe during the Second World War meant that there were still plenty of bomb sites, quite literally bomb sites, buildings that had been razed to the ground, over grown now with weeds because there were so many that it wasn't possible to build on them all just in a short period of time. I remember seeing the bomb sites in London, 20 years after the conclusion of the Second World War.

Well, that is something of what the children of Israel were looking at when they looked at the temple site, the temple razed by Nebuchadnezzar 60 or 70 years before that, charred stones, broken rubble, overgrown with weeds, weeds that had been growing up for decade upon decade. They looked at it and grew discouraged. That is what Haggai is preaching about. He is [?] it is something small. Don't worry about it. We will soon get this cleared out of the way. He recognizes the discouragement. Where do you begin in rebuilding the temple when things have got so bad?

It wasn't just that they were starting at zero. They were starting at less than zero. Lack of resources, lack of preparations a lack even of skilled men to undertake the work. All these things are weighing heavily upon the people of God.

They didn't have much in the way of resources. They certainly didn't have what Solomon had when he started, nor did they have what Solomon had during the building of the first temple.

So it is in that context that Haggai wants to encourage the people of God. And when I say Haggai, of course, he is delivering God's Word. It is God who is sending his preachers, his preacher to preach a word of encouragement to the people of God.

And it is in God's providence that we come to Haggai chapter two on this the first Lord's Day of a new year. Perhaps 2010 has not been your best year ever. Perhaps by the grace of God it was somewhat better than 2009, but you like some of the folk in Haggai's day can look back to not so long ago when things were an awful lot better than they are just now. And there is something of that temptation. Well, you know, it is not as good as it once was.

I was reading an article, just a brief article in a news publication. It was talking about the spirit of we can do it for which America is justly famous. It is one of the big differences that I encountered when first coming to the United States. I was amazed at how quickly people are willing to say, "We can do that." And as a somewhat pessimistic Scot, "Now we can't." But America said, "We can do this." Now the article was just simply saying this, that people are losing that ability to say, "We can do it." And that will become a self fulfilling prophecy. If people think they can't do it then they will never try to do it and they will prove themselves right. If American loses its we can do it attitude then America will never dig itself out of the current economic difficulties.

My purpose is not to give you some sort of pep talk so your economic circumstances will suddenly mature in 2011. Let others do that.

But here we come to the Word of God and we recognize how despondency can eat away at our desire to be busy about the work of the kingdom. We see it in our every day lives. How we can see it, too, in the work of the kingdom.

So here on the last day of the great feast Haggai gets up and he said, "I know why it is that you are discouraged. I understand that. You can look back to the past and you think it is not like it was in Solomon's day. It is not even like it was in David's day and you are all discouraged by it. You see the enormity of the work and you don't think it can be done."

So Haggai is being sent by God to bring God's Word to the hearts of God's people. And it is a word that does not cover over and ignore the enormity of the task. There is a full recognition. There is a confrontation of exactly what the difficulties are, the lack of resources, the lack of preparation, the lack of challenge amongst the people of God. All

these things are absolutely true. But, says Haggai, “I am bringing you God’s Word and God has a word to encourage you.”

We don’t have time to go through each and every line of the encouragements of God, but I want you to follow me in God’s Word. Line after line, verse after verse God speaking to his people brings the same encouragement that the writer of the Hebrews brings to the people of God 500 years later on. Our focus is not to be upon ourselves, not even on the task in hand, but on the God who equips us for it. If we focus upon ourselves we will grow discouraged. If we focus upon the task, we see the enormity of it and the fact that we seem in our generation to have squandered some of the resources of the previous generation. We look back upon 100 years ago or 200 years ago when God had raised up many men who were preaching faithfully the Word of God. There is a heritage of the preaching of God’s Word. But in our generation how many people in our circle of neighbors and friends, those who are not Christians have now even the least understanding of the Word of God? Their knowledge of Scripture is abysmally low. We have as a nation—and it is not just America, my nation, too. I don’t want to ever seem as though I am making any negative comment upon the United States. I love this country and I am glad to be here. But I don’t want to be blind either to some of the weaknesses of the land in which God has set us, weaknesses in my own nation, too, that we have squandered our inheritance in the Lord.

The riches of a previous generation, the riches that David had built up so that Solomon could build the temple that is really not where we are at as a nation, not if we are honest. We might look at the circumstances in which God has set us and think we are not just at ground zero. We are worse than at ground zero.

The sins which so easily entangle, of which the book of Hebrews speaks, the weeds of sin have gotten hold and we hardly know where to begin.

So where should we look for our encouragement? Are we going to look for our encouragement in ourselves? I can do it. Or are we going to fall back and say, “No, this is a work that cannot be done”? Or are we going to listen to God’s Word as Haggai preached God’s Word, God’s man for that generation and hear how God gently, graciously builds up his people line after line?

“Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD.”²

What is it that Haggai is being sent by God to tell the people? Do the work, yes. But let this be your confidence. I am with you.

I don’t suppose there is ever a day in the experience of God’s people when that work would be out of place. And how particularly kind is God to bring this word to our attention on the first day, first Lord’s Day of a new year? Is there anything that we need

² Haggai 2:4.

to know more than this great truth that God is preaching a word to us from his Word? I am with you.

I don't know all the sorrows and all the burdens which you might have. By your kindness to me you have often been pleased to share them with me. But there may be others, burdens which are known only to you, particular struggles. And here is a word in season for each and every one of you. No matter what particular anxious thoughts you might have for 2011, whatever difficulties you might face, whether it is a concern for your own physical health, a concern in your place of work, a sorrow which you have brought with you into 2011 which was laid upon you in 2010, here is God's Word for you.

"I am with you." And that is a word in which we can rejoice.

He does exactly what the writer to the Hebrews was doing for the people of God in his day. Yes, you have difficulties. Yes, you have burdens. The sin that so easily entangles, but looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith who for the joy that was set before him...

What is it that the writer to the Hebrews was it? He said that you come to Jesus and look to him. If your focus is upon your difficulties and your sorrows and your burden, you will always be discouraged. If you are trusting in your own strength you will always fail, but look to the author and the finisher of your faith. The message really has not changed from Haggai's day. God sends Haggai on the last day of the great feast with this message, "I am with you."

"...according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt."³

There is a reason, brethren, why our very congregation bears the name covenant. It is not as it were some obscure passage from the Old Testament that few people have ever considered. You know, it is so central to our understanding of who God is in relation to his people. He says, "I am with you." And let me remind you of the God who is speaking to you. I am your covenantally faithful God the one who has promised himself to his people, who has kept his promises. Every promise that our gracious God makes to us in his Word—I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. I am with you. I am with you to the ends of the earth. I was with you when I brought you out of Egypt. I was with you when the Egyptians chased after you to threaten to destroy you. I caused the waters to be parted so that you walk through on dry land. And the same waters that destroy your enemies, I am your covenantally faithful God. I am with you. My Spirit remains in your midst.

God's promise to us that his Spirit remains in our midst. God is sovereign over the nations.

³ Haggai 2:5.

“Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in.”⁴

Well, what is it that God is saying to his people? He is... you know, you are discouraged and you are overwhelmed by the signs of the times. I mean, the work is enormous and we have little, nothing in the way of resources. We don't have what David had. We don't have what Solomon had. What can we do?

Have you forgotten that God who you worship, the God who has the nations in the palm, kings and princes, he makes them do whatever he wants. The nations that are a drop in the bucket, as Scripture describes it, they are like the dust on the scales. You see, you are concerned about these things that the God who you are worshipping is not only your covenantally faithful God, he is the one who will shake the nations when he desires to do it. And all the gold and silver which you say we don't have he will bring it in. Why? Because all the resources of this world are his to do what he is pleased to do with them.

Why are you staring down at your feet then, people of God? Why are you growing discouraged and thinking back to some ideal day in the past and you say “It wasn't like this in David's day. It wasn't like this in Solomon's day. They had all these resources. And we have nothing.”

But God is saying through his servant Haggai, “I am with you and I will shake the nations when it is time to do so.” And all the gold and silver that is needed to accomplish the task, I have it on hand. That is not for you to worry about. Work for I am with you. I will provide the resources when the resources are needed.

But having brought the people of God thus far in a challenge them to rethink how they are viewing the work that is set before them, he makes this great promise to them. I will be glorified. The temple in Jerusalem will not be some ramshackle hut. I will be glorified. And if you are looking back to the days of the old temple and lamenting that the great temple of Solomon has been burnt to the ground, God in his grace and mercy to the people of God are listening.

Last day of the great feast, as Haggai is preaching to them that Sunday morning on the 17th of October, 520 BC, says, “I will be glorified. You will see it. And it won't be the temple of Solomon that you are looking back for greater glory will be shown. I will show you something even greater. The latter greater will be greater than the former glory.”

Now as the people of God are listening to that Sunday morning sermon on the last day of the great feast Haggai, God's messenger, is dealing with a number of issues confronting the reasons for their discouragement. And he is pointing them consistently by the Word of God to God himself. God is saying, “I am with you. I am your covenant God. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. My Spirit remains with you.”

⁴ Haggai 2:6-7.

He is a God who is sovereign over the nations. He is a God who holds in his hands the gold mines of the world, the silver mines in the world. God himself promises that he will be glorified and more. He will be even more glorified in the days that lie ahead.

Such is the sermon that Haggai preached on the last day of the great feast.

Take your Bibles in your hand and open them to the gospel of Christ by John. Open them at chapter seven and read with me now from John chapter seven at verse 37.

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”⁵

Haggai preached on the last day of the great feast and God promised his people that there would be greater glory shown in the future. And Jesus knowing that his time was come entered into the temple and stood on the last day of the great feast, in the same place that Haggai preached to the people of God. And here is his message.

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”⁶

Here is a simple message which will bless our souls, I trust, not only this day, but throughout every day of this year. And, by the grace of God for eternity to come.

To whom shall we come? We come to Christ. Come to Christ. Who may come? Anyone who thirsts. Is there anyone who is too thirsty to take a drink? Anyone can come to Christ. All those who are thirsty recognizing our need we come. And what are we to do to respond to the command to come to Christ in faith drink in the expectation that the invitation to come, the command to come is not given in vain.

“On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.’”⁷

Let me conclude with the words with which we began our worship service, the gospel of Christ by Isaiah.

Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

⁵ John 7:37.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.⁸

Amen.

⁸ Isaiah 55:1-3.