

# But From This Day On I Will Bless You

Haggai

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**Bible Text:** Haggai 2:10-19; Luke 2:57-62

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To refresh our own memories, I would bring to your attention the context in which Haggai is writing. God has, in his providence, brought back a portion of his people that were taken into exile. They were taken into exile because of their cold heartedness towards God. They were not faithful as God's people and if we wanted to read of that we could see in the book of Jeremiah how wicked some of the people of God were in Jeremiah's day. And so God's judgment fell upon them. Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple itself was but a pile of charred and broken stones.

God has in his hands the hearts of kings and of princes and turns them, as the book of Proverbs says, as a man might turn "rivers of water".<sup>1</sup> He turns the heart this way and that and achieves whatever he purposes to achieve. He turned the heart of Cyrus and allowed a certain portion of God's people to return in order that they should build up the temple.

And yet there were those who had no desire to see that work continue who engaged in their letter writing campaign in order to undermine the work. And the work ground to a halt. For almost 20 years, two decades, not quite but almost the work stagnates. Nothing happens. And the people of God rather than being about the work of building up the temple used that time to repair their own homes.

You can almost hear their thoughts: "Today is not the day to be building the temple. Not now. Yes, it is a work that has to be undertaken, but not now."

And it is in the midst of that context that God raises up Haggai to speak a word in season to the people. And as we have been engaged in a study of Haggai we see God's grace poured out upon the people of God to challenge them and to provoke them to good works, to stir up their hearts for the things of God.

The work of Haggai is not complete, evidently, as we still have verses in Scripture from which they needed to prosper and by the grace of God I trust that we, too, will prosper as we reflect upon God's Word this morning. What Haggai is raised up by God to do in his generation perhaps we need to hear, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 21:1.

It begins by God telling Haggai to go and ask some questions of the priests. And so the first thing I would bring to your attention in this portion of God's Word is the lesson that is to be learned from the corruption of men. He asked two basic and very simple questions. The Lord tells Haggai to go and ask this question of the priests. The tribe of Levi did not have land in the same way that other tribes were allocated land in which they might have the fruit of the produce of the land. And so they received from the gifts of sacrifices a certain portion. That was how they were supported.

Now supposing . . ., says Haggai to the priests, supposing the priest is taking just what he is allowed to, that is, the meat that has been offered up for his use. As he is carrying it away in his garment and it touches something else, does that then become holy? Well, of course the priests who had the responsibility of reading the Word of God, understanding it, applying it, they were used to be asked those sorts of questions. Now what does the Word of God say about this particular set of circumstances? If you, as a priest, should happen by my house on your way home from the temple and you happened to be carrying in the fold of your garment the meat which is holy and you happened to brush against something upon something does that make it holy as well?

Oh, no, no, oh stop there! No, it doesn't. Holiness can't be communicated to inanimate objects just by brushing against them in that way. It doesn't work like that.

So then Haggai asked another question. If holiness doesn't "rub off" get in that way, what about corruption? Does that get communicated in the other direction? Supposing somebody has to attend to the death of a relative and he has been in touch, quite literally, with a dead body and he lays his hand upon something else. Does that corruption get communicated? It is much the same sort of question, but it is now going in the opposite direction. And the context is the same, asking the priest. What does the Word of God say? Help me to understand!

So Haggai asks the question of the priests and the priests then respond, "Well, no, if somebody comes into contact with a dead body he is himself ceremonially unclean and if he touches anything else, that other object then becomes ceremonially unclean." And so the corruption can be communicated, but the holiness does not communicate the other in the other direction.

"I understand," says Haggai. And so it is with this people. He draws a connection between what he is seeing in us and the question about the communication of corruption, the communication of holiness. And he is drawing some lessons out of it. He is saying that this has application to this people. And the very phrase itself should put us, as it were, somewhat on our guard if we have sat under the ministry of God's Word in these recent weeks and thought and pondered about the book of Haggai. We will recognize that very expression as arising out of the very first chapter of Haggai when the people of God who had sat back in their complacency and have done nothing for almost two decades.

When Haggai comes to them initially he addresses them as “these people”.<sup>2</sup> That is the Word of the Lord. And so when the Word of the Lord comes again through Haggai once more, “this people” is mentioned.<sup>3</sup> “This people” should be taking notice. Why is he using this phrase again?

There is evidently something that we are not doing. We are getting something wrong. We are not doing what God would have us do.

But it wasn't that sacrifices were not being undertaken in what remained of the temple. They had been offering sacrifices. But the question was: Were those sacrifices effectual? Were they accomplishing the purposes for which sacrifices were meant to be offered?

Well, as we ponder that thought, we move on to the second illustration which Haggai brings to the people. If we have a lesson from corruption we have also a lesson from circumstances. He refers back to what we have seen in a previous chapter where the people of God were not prospering financially. And even as we considered that, - the outworking of harsh economic circumstances - the crops were not yielding the sort of produce which they thought they ought to yield. And what Haggai says is, “You know, don't think that this is just bad luck. God is teaching you things in your every circumstances.” There is nothing that you pass through that you shouldn't be asking yourself the question: Well, what is God teaching me in this? How am I to learn spiritually? How might I fail to prosper economically, but prosper spiritually by going through those hard lessons?

And so Haggai is drawing attention to the circumstances. He says and I am paraphrasing, “You went to your store and you thought you would find 20 measures of grain and you found only 10. You went to the wine vats and you thought you would find 50, but there were only 20 measures.”<sup>4</sup>

And God says and again I am paraphrasing, “You know, if you are looking for someone to blame, it's me! I did it. I sent the mildew. I sent the very things that spoiled the produce of the land.”<sup>5</sup>

And that wasn't malice on the part of God. It was grace. Because these things are meant to cause us to seek God and say, “Lord, show me greater blessings even through the difficulties I face.”

Not every hardship is the result of our own faults and failures. It may have been in Haggai's day, but it is not always the case. There was also Job who was afflicted much and yet it was not because of any fault that was to be found in him. That is made explicit

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<sup>2</sup> Haggai 1:2.

<sup>3</sup> Haggai 2:14.

<sup>4</sup> Haggai 2:16.

<sup>5</sup> Haggai 2:17.

for us in Scripture. An upright man, the Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

But we still are able to learn some vital lessons even as we reflect upon the circumstances through which we pass. Learn the lesson, not just from the teaching of Scripture, but from the circumstances through which we pass.

I struck you. I struck you, says God, with mildew. Yet you did not turn to me. Learn the lesson. Not bad luck. It was meant, rather to drive us to our knees and to seek the God of heaven. It didn't have that effect. That was the problem the children of Israel.

Now they should have seen the lesson because the Word of God was before them already. Most Scripture and their circumstances, but it comes to no surprise to us, are united in the same lesson. That you are either going to be in conflict. The Word of God is not going to say one thing and our circumstances curiously say something completely different. No, God is bringing all the strands of time in harmony with what he reveals in his Word so that the greater blessing, yet is brought about.

So what is the lesson which is not spelled out for us in great detail? Hardly made mention of at all, in fact, in the book of the prophet Haggai. What are we to learn? What should the people of God as they heard God's man preaching to them in their generation, what lessons should they have been learning the lesson from corruption, the lesson from the circumstances?

It was that they had been going up to the place where sacrifices were meant to be offered and they had been offering up their sacrifices, but their hearts weren't really in it. That was the problem.

Now as the hearers of God's Word in Haggai's day about 520 BC, we can date this particular verse of Scripture not just to the year, but to the exact day. As they heard this they were being challenged. Do you think that because you go up to the temple precincts and there offer a sacrifice that that righteous deed, as it were, will then make holy all the other things that you are doing or perhaps not doing? Is the offering up of a sacrifice sufficient?

Well, that is the point of the questions that he is asking the priests. Does it work that way? If you go up with the animal that you want to sacrifice on the temple mount, you go to Mount Zion and there you take your animal and you sacrifice it, is that going to make holy all the other things that you are doing or not doing, sins of omission, sins of commission, just because you got the temple to sacrifice? Is that the way it works? Or is it the other way around? The fact that you are not living godly lives, that you are really more concerned about the things of this world than you are about the things of God? Which way does it work? Does the holy sacrifice, as it were, make holy your unacceptable things or does the corruption go the other direction? That is exactly the point that Haggai is making.

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<sup>6</sup> Job 1:21.

We can offer our sacrifices. But our sacrifices are tainted by a godless life. That is exactly what Haggai is saying. And when we say Haggai is saying that, we say that is the Word of the Lord. Scripture and circumstances are in harmony to teach a lesson to the people of God.

Now you might ask, “Is that an accurate description of the situation that Haggai was facing?” The people of God had been returned by the command of Cyrus to build up the temple. Yet they had signally failed to do it. Instead they had sat back in their complacency and done nothing for almost two decades. Almost a generation almost had passed when Haggai is raised up. Evidently the work which they had begun was not quite with the same vigor or zeal which it ought to have had; the zeal which rightfully it ought to have had. It was for them something of just another chore. “Yes, I will do it. If the law requires me to go up to the temple then I will take the animal. I will do it and the sooner it is done the better. I will get it out of the way.”

If we put our hand to the plow, says Jesus, and look back, then you are not worthy.<sup>7</sup> And how ought you and I to love the Lord our God?

I trust, boys and girls, the answer to that is immediately if not upon your lips at least in your mind. We should love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind.<sup>8</sup>

But the people of God were not yet at that stage. They had begun the work, but it wasn't with the zeal that it ought to have.

Now what might we expect God to do at that point? What would be justice at that point for the people of God? Or we might say, “Well, we could hardly blame God if He were to come in justice upon a people who had been so lethargic, so lazy for so long.” If God had at this point broken in and said, “I am done with you, you have not changed. There is no great difference between you and your parents that were taken off into captivity. A people who draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are not drawn near to me.” If God had come down with judgment at that point, what would we have to say if we were reflecting back upon those years? If we have grown cold in our affection towards God it is not that we do not love God, but as we examine our hearts we have somewhat grown cold in our affections towards God. What if God were to come in judgment upon us for being like that? What would be our response?

You know, God always does what is right. If God judges me for every sin, he always does what is right.

That is part of the great lesson of Psalm 51. In Psalm 51, as you will possibly remember, David is afflicted in heart. Why? Because he has fallen into great sin and done his best to cover it up. Now such a man does not enjoy a close fellowship with God. If you have

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 9:62.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 22:37.

engaged in great sin as David had and then tried to hush it up by an even greater sin, committing adultery, trying to hush it up by murder, tell me that your quiet time is going to be one of a close walk with God under those circumstances!

Rather, God has to raise up another man to speak a word in season, even to David himself. “Thou art the man,” says Nathan the prophet to David!<sup>9</sup>

And it is in response to that rebuke that David writes his great penitential psalm: Psalm 51. He recognizes his own faults and failings.

God, if you come in judgment upon me, you will be just. 'Gainst Thee, Thee only have I sinn'd, in thy sight done this ill.<sup>10</sup>

But it is as David goes on to explain his condition before a holy God that he recognizes that it is not by sacrifice that he might once more approach a holy God.

“For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it.”<sup>11</sup> I would have brought the bulls. I would have brought the sheep. I would have brought the goats. I would have done it all. “A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”<sup>12</sup>

It doesn't matter how many sacrifices we offer at the temple, says David, if our hearts are distanced from God.

Saul wanted to offer sacrifice, but Samuel was providentially hindered and for a time he waited. But Samuel still failed to show. And so somewhat in exasperation, perhaps, frustration, Saul offers sacrifice himself. In so doing he does what he ought not to have done. It was not his calling to offer the sacrifices. He usurped the authority of those who were called to offer sacrifice, and in particular the calling of Samuel. It was a good deed in some respects to offer sacrifice, but when it was done by the wrong person it became a great sin. Obedience is what God desires before sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> And for that the kingdom was taken away from Saul.

When a mass murder is executed by the state we call it justice. If I take the life even of a mass murderer it is called murder.

The people of God in Haggai's day were going up the temple and they were offering sacrifice, but they had failed to grasp a much more fundamental truth, a truth that was laid perhaps even somewhat heavily upon the heart of David to break him so that he did cry out to God. His circumstances united with the Word of God to humble even the man of God's own choosing.

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 51:4 Scottish Metrical Psalms.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 51:16.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 51:17.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Samuel 15:22.

How does God deal with the children of Israel in Haggai's time? I want us to see in the Word of God such grace as will cause us all but to put our hands upon our mouths and say, "This is grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy."

We are going to ask what is in our hearts. "Lord, blow upon the embers of devotion to thee and fan it into a flame!"

The illustrations are not yet done in the ministry of Haggai. He has been to the priests and he has used this question and answer about the Word of God. He has been to the people, as it were, and said, "Now think about your circumstances. What was God teaching you in these things? What are you meant to learn? Are these not things that should have driven you to your knees, things that would bring you to the very presence of God? But I have another illustration for you. What is in your barns just now?"

Now because we know the precise time of the giving of this particular prophecy from the Lord, not just to the year, but to the date, we can answer that question. The answer is there was nothing. It was December, the middle of December. If memory serves me correct, I think it was the December 18<sup>th</sup>, 520 BC. What is in your barns? Nothing. They had sowed the seed in the hope that next year the harvest would come and they were waiting to see whether God would give the increase.

They were, as it were, brought to the point of a realization of their complete and utter dependence upon God. If they were to eat next year it would be because God had been gracious to them. It was not because they had set aside great wealth to see them through the lean years. They had been through the lean years and there was nothing left. If there was to be any blessing it would have to come from God.

What confidence did the people have for the next year that God would, indeed, be gracious to them? What hope for the future? Well, here is one. God has sent his prophet to preach his Word.

Boys and girls, you will be familiar with the time of Elijah possibly. You will remember that for a period of years the heavens were shut up. There was no rain upon the land and the crops failed. People were dying of starvation. Indeed, one of the incidents in the life of Elijah is of the widow who was gathering up a few sticks so that she could make one last loaf of bread, so that she and her son could eat one last meal and then she and her son would die. They had no food left.

If the widow of Zarephath was interpreting her circumstances in the light of Haggai's understanding what would she have made of them? What should I understand about the famine in Elijah's day? Was it just "bad luck" or was God teaching the people of God something?

Well, the real issue is not the failure of the crops. The real issue was that God had hidden Elijah.

You can read the account there in 1 Kings 17 and following. God deliberately takes Elijah away from the people so that he no longer preaches. That is where the famine truly lies: a famine of the preaching of God's Word. Who is going to tell the people? They were failing to grasp their circumstances. Haggai was explaining it to them in his day and God was at work through his prophet. In Elijah's day God had removed the prophet from the scene. There was no one to explain the circumstances to the people of God.

How might the people of God in Haggai's day be confident of God's grace towards them? Because God was dealing with them graciously. He was raising up a man, Haggai, to preach his Word to that generation.

And those words were not full of condemnation, not harsh, but even as God was by his Spirit blowing upon the embers of their affection godward, he spoke words of hope though his servant. We saw this in a previous passage of Haggai.

"I am with you", says the Lord. "I am with you."<sup>14</sup>

And now even though the people of God are challenged for their lack of zeal, here is what God graciously says to them: a lesson in compassion in verses 18 and 19.

Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid, consider: Is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you.<sup>15</sup>

There is grace in the Word of God. Read Haggai and see if you can find anything that would cause God to turn towards his people and speak such words of tenderness? Do we find in the children of Israel such a zeal and a burden for the people of God or for the work of the kingdom or for the building up of the temple? We see lethargy. We see half heartedness. We see the folly of placing our confidence in our own resources.

"Oh, I have done this, or made that sacrifice and that should be sufficient for God. "

With our eyes open we rise up not to condemn a generation that has long since past, but to see our own lives so often reflected in the foolishness of those who have gone before.

But what hope is there for us? It is that God has sent forth his Word, the Word made flesh. He speaks to needy sinners. Their confidence is not that we have offered the sacrifice in the temple, whatever form that might take in our particular generation, and then gone about our own business as though there were no God. Our confidence is not in ourselves. Our confidence is in a God who is always gracious, who says to his people on that day long ago through his servant, "Today on the December 19<sup>th</sup>, 520 BC - the 24<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Haggai 1:13; 2:4.

<sup>15</sup> Haggai 2:18-19.



day of the ninth month,” - who would say to us, on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011, “Today, from now on, I will bless you,” because he always blesses his people in Christ.

The world may know famine, but for those who are in Christ there is no removal of the Word. It is in our hands and in our mouths. We come to the one who blesses us in spite of our weaknesses, the frailties of our flesh and we would ask of him that great boon, that great blessing. Though at times we may be exercised for our economic condition, anxiety for our place of work or the lack thereof and do quite rightly bring such matters before the throne of grace, would we not set aside all such concerns for this? That the Lord would renew a right spirit within us, that zeal for the house of the Lord would consume us, that you and I together might place our hand upon the plow and not look back.

Hear from Haggai, God’s grace:

“But from this day on I will bless you.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Haggai 2:19.