

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Work For I Am With You

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Haggai

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to the Book of Haggai. Haggai is the second smallest book in the Old Testament behind Obadiah and he is the first of the post-exilic prophets. In terms of timeline, we recall that Micah and Isaiah prophesied in the time of the Assyrian invasion of Northern Israel. They were successful in initiating a revival in Southern Israel that caused God to grant them a reprieve. Habakkuk and Jeremiah ministered two generations later. The age of revival was over and new children had grown up who did not know the Lord and who had forgotten their history. Judah followed the ways of Northern Israel into apostasy and idolatry and as a result the Southern Kingdom, like the Northern Kingdom two generations before was destroyed. The temple was demolished and the elite of the people sent into exile in Babylon. One full human lifetime passed and then Babylon itself fell to the Medo-Persians and the exiles were sent back to the land and permitted to rebuild. Haggai was among those who returned and when he spoke these words it was the first time the voice of God had been heard by God's people after the exile. It was a big deal. Haggai's book is arranged around 4 of his oracles and I plan to walk you through them very quickly in order to give you a sense of the story and the structure.

Oracle #1: Delay and Disinterest Rebuked

The first oracle begins at 1:2:

²“Thus speaks the LORD of hosts, saying: ‘This people says, “The time has not come, the time that the LORD’S house should be built.”’”

³Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴“*Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?*” ⁵Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: “Consider your ways! (Haggai 1:2-5. NKJV)

If you remember your readings in Ezra 11 months ago then you remember that because of some political upheavals the work on the temple had been temporarily halted. There had been a transition in power back in Persia and some local opponents of the work had seized upon that to obtain an injunction against the rebuilding of the temple. The people used that as an excuse to put the work of the temple on hold and to concentrate on building their own houses. This went on for 15 years! For 15 years they were in stall mode, building their own houses while the house of the Lord lay in ruins. God was not pleased. He robs them of joy and he ruins their harvest and he tells them that he will keep doing that until they reprioritize the House of the Lord. Look at verse 9:

⁹“*You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?*” says the LORD of hosts. “*Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house.* (Haggai 1:9. NKJV)

“You thought that happy days were ahead because you’ve got your land back but things didn’t work out for you. Even when you made money it disappeared. That was no accident”, God says, “I did it and I will keep doing it until you return to the work I gave you to do.”

Well, happily, this time the warning works. Unlike in the days of Habakkuk and Jeremiah, this time God’s people listen and they humble themselves, they fear the Lord and they recommit to the work God had given them. They rebuild the house against political opposition and in the space of about 4 years, the work is completed.

Oracle #2: Encouragement Offered and Greater Glory Promised

The second oracle begins at chapter 2:1:

¹In the seventh *month*, on the twenty-first of the month, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying: ²“Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, saying: ³“Who is left among you who saw this ⁴temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, *is this* not in your eyes as nothing? ⁴Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,” says the LORD; ‘and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,’ says the LORD, ‘and work; for I *am* with you,’ says the LORD of hosts. (Haggai 2:1-4. NKJV)

This second oracle was given only about a month after the first. The people had begun the work on the temple but it quickly became clear that this temple was going to be smaller and less glorious than the one built by Solomon. As the foundation was laid and the lesser size and scope became apparent the hearts of some of the older folks who had seen the original temple began to despair and God sends a word of encouragement. “Don’t compare and don’t despair and don’t forget that I am with you. Do not despise the day of small beginnings.” God says that the important thing is not how big things are now, the important thing is that God is with you in the project and if that is true than you can count on a glorious end. He says that even though money is tight and materials are few, in time, God will so work events that the gold and treasures of the nations will fill the house and declare God’s glory; and in fact that is what happened. When Darius eventually found the original edict of Cyrus commissioning the project he not only reinstated their legal right to the work, he funded the work out of the royal treasury. The tiny remnant of Israel began the work in poverty and against opposition but they finished the work with all the wealth of Persia at their disposal. Indeed King Herod in New Testament times enlarged and enhanced the temple such that it was literally true, 500 years later that the glory of this house surpassed the former. The kingdom of God is always like a mustard seed; starting small but growing glorious because of the promise and presence of Almighty God.

Oracle #3: The Unwarranted Grace Of God

The third oracle begins at chapter 2:10:

¹⁰On the twenty-fourth *day* of the ninth *month*, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ¹¹“Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Now, ask the priests *concerning the law*, saying, ¹²“If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?””

Then the priests answered and said, “No.”

¹³And Haggai said, “If *one who is unclean because of a dead body* touches any of these, will it be unclean?”

So the priests answered and said, “It shall be unclean.”

¹⁴Then Haggai answered and said, “‘So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,’ says the LORD, ‘and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean. (Haggai 2:10-14. NKJV)

This is one of those oracles that tend to make us not want to read the Minor Prophets. Bible scholars tell us that Haggai was a prophet AND a priest and so he delivers this prophesy in priestly language that makes no sense to us at all; let me see if I can translate this for you. According to Levitical law, if a priest was carrying consecrated meat – holy meat for sacrifice – it made his clothes holy but the holiness did not thereby pass to the things touched by his clothes. The point is that holiness is inherent not contagious. On the other hand, he says if you touch a dead body and become defiled and then you touch someone else that person also becomes defiled. The point here is that defilement IS contagious. Let me make a common place analogy. Healthiness is inherent not contagious. If I as a healthy person breathe on you a sick person I cannot infect you with healthiness. Health is not contagious. But if I as a sick person breathe on you a healthy person I can infect you with my illness. So it is with sin compared to holiness. Holiness is inherent, sin is contagious. Now here is why that is a problem: what do you do when everyone is sick? What do you do when the priesthood is sick? Once the entire population, including the priesthood is infected, what hope is there for health? Once the priesthood is defiled it is game over because everything they touch becomes defiled and you need holy offerings to atone for sin. That is what he is saying, he is saying we are in serious trouble and there is no hope for us apart from the unwarranted grace of God. And that is exactly what the prophet promises. He says just wait and just watch and you will see signs of God’s unwarranted favour upon our people and our nation; God will bless us despite our hopeless situation.

The prophet Zechariah ministering at the same time gave the same promise but he did it with a prophetic picture instead of an oracle in prose. He said:

³Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel.

⁴Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, “Take away the filthy garments from him.” And to him He said, “See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.” (Zechariah 3:3-4. NKJV)

Joshua is the High Priest but he is contaminated and once the High Priest is contaminated it is supposed to be game over – that’s like if the only doctor in town gets the plague – that’s not good, but Zechariah has a dream where he sees the High Priest dressed in filthy rags and God takes the rags and burns them up and clothes him in rich robes. What these prophets are

foretelling is a fresh start; a clean slate, that can only be attributed to the Sovereign Grace of God. That's a good oracle.

Oracle #4: The Promise Reaffirmed

The fourth and last oracle is different than all the others. It is private. It is delivered not to the people as a whole but to Zerubbabel, the descendent of David and heir to the promises; it begins at chapter 2:21

²¹“Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying:

‘I will shake heaven and earth.
²² I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms;
I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms.
I will overthrow the chariots
And those who ride in them;
The horses and their riders shall come down,
Every one by the sword of his brother.

²³‘In that day,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will take you, Zerubbabel My servant, the son of Shealtiel,’ says the LORD, ‘and will make you like a signet *ring*; for I have chosen you,’ says the LORD of hosts.” (Haggai 2:21-23. NKJV)

To make sense of this oracle you have to go back to Jeremiah 22 when the prophet of God had said this to Zerubbabel's grandfather:

²⁴“As I live,” says the LORD, “though ^fConiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were **the signet on My right hand**, yet I would pluck you off; (Jeremiah 22:24. NKJV)

The signet represents the authority of the King's decrees and marks the wearer as the agent of that authority. The Jewish people understood that God was their only and rightful King but they recognized that God exercised his royal dominion through human agency – a human king. God had promised to exercise his royal dominion through the human line of David. Zerubbabel's grandfather Jeconiah or Coniah as he is called here, was an evil, unbelieving man who was “plucked out of the dynasty” so to speak because of his wickedness. The promise and favour of God upon David's house appeared to have disappeared but now the prophet is telling Zerubbabel that it did not disappear, it just deferred and now it has returned full force upon him. He is the rightful heir and God's promises are still in effect. There will be tumult and chaos among the nations and even in the cosmos, the prophet says, but that is of no matter and only serves God's

decree. The important thing is that the promise is in effect. God will rule over the earth through the line of David. Wait for it and believe in it for the Word of the Lord shall surely come to pass.

Well, that is the Book of Haggai. John Calvin said that we read the Bible to learn about God and to learn about ourselves; the old Baptist Catechism said that we read the Bible to learn about God and what he requires of us. Putting those things together actually produces a pretty decent guideline for preaching. The job of the preacher is to read the text of the Bible, explain it and then to help God's people reflect upon what they've learned about God, what they've learned about themselves and what manner of response is recommended by the text. Let's use that as a guideline for reviewing what we've seen so far.

What Do We Learn About God From The Book Of Haggai?

1. God is a jealous God

He will frustrate our labours and scatter what we gather until he is absolutely sure of our singular devotion. By the way, that should not have been new information to the people of Haggai's day. God had said in his Ten Commandments:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness *of anything* ... For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth *generations* of those who hate Me, ⁹but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6. NKJV)

“Worship me or I will mess you up”, that is a pretty decent summary of the second commandment and that is basically what we see happening in the first chapter of Haggai. The people are neglecting the Lord. They are building their own houses but they are neglecting the house of the Lord. Tithes aren't being gathered, work isn't being done and worship is on hold – and God is not content with this state of affairs. He will not play second fiddle to their personal and familial ambitions. So he begins to mess them up. This is who God is. You need to know that. If he suspects that you love your business more than you love him, he will mess it up. If he suspects that you love your kids more than you love him he will mess them up. If he suspects that you love your wife more than you love him he will mess her up. God will be first in your life or he will ruin your life if you have pledged yourself to him.

Now before we convict God of being narcissistic and crazy, we have to remember that only God could feel and act this way without being narcissistic and crazy. God is meant to be the centre of the universe so it isn't crazy when he demands to be the centre of the universe. God designed you to be devoted to him and you will only be happy when you are devoted to him so it is right that he acts aggressively to secure your devotion. It is for your good as much as it is for his glory. God is the only creature in the universe who has the right to demand absolute love and devotion – if anything else makes that demand on us it is an idol.

2. God inspires and then empowers our righteous resolutions

All throughout the Bible you see these Sovereignty Sandwiches – I made that phrase up and you should probably not write it down, but I can't think of a better way to describe these things. God always initiates our righteous resolutions. He stirs us up to love and good deeds. The action of God is always prior. So it is here. The people were not planning to resume the work, they were doing their own thing but then God spoke! He stirred up the people by sending a prophet and he convicted their hearts through his Holy Word. God initiates. And then when his people respond God empowers their obedience. Look at 1:14:

¹⁴So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the LORD of hosts, their God (Haggai 1:14. NKJV)

God initiated and then God empowered and somewhere in the middle the people of God respond correctly - that's a Sovereignty Sandwich! That is exactly what you see in 1 Corinthians 15:

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10. NRSV)

That's a Sovereignty Sandwich! God began the work and God enables the work and in the middle somewhere Paul worked harder than everybody else, but not I but the grace of God in me. We struggle to understand how Sovereignty and Human responsibility go together and we will talk about that in January but the point here is that what God inspires he is faithful to empower by his grace. Somebody should have said amen to that; where is Pastor Mike when you need him?

3. The grace of God is always undeserved

The people of God were up the creek without a paddle in Haggai's day but God in his grace provided a clean slate. Grace is not grace if we deserve it. Grace is not grace if we earn it. Grace is only grace when we are stuck and without hope; grace is only grace when it is given. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9. NKJV)

In the Old Testament just as in the New people are not saved by striving or by works of the law but they are saved by the unwarranted grace of God. The Gospel is the same in Haggai as it is in Ephesians. God doesn't change.

4. The promise of God is sure, though the timing is beyond our comprehension

All of the Old Testament is promise and that promise is often deferred and often confirmed but only finds its fulfilment in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ. The theme of promise confirmed and deferred is one of the main threads in Biblical theology. Think about that for a second. After the fall God promised Eve that a seed from her body would come and defeat the devil and restore the peace of God. When Eve had Cain she thought he was that child. She rejoiced over him and thought that the promise of God would be realized in her day. But what happened? Cain turned out to be a crazy person and he killed his brother Abel. I think we all agree that Cain was not Jesus. Fast forward to David. David desired to build God's house and God loved that desire so he made David a promise, he promised David that he would build HIS HOUSE! He promised David that his son, or his seed would sit on the throne of Israel and would rule over all the earth. David's son would be MESSIAH, God's Son. So when David had Solomon what did he think? He thought: "This is the one! This is my son who will be God's Son and will rule over all the earth." But Solomon was not Jesus. The promise was deferred. David's house produced king and after king and each one proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was not Jesus. Jeconiah was so not Jesus that God said that if he were a signet ring God would cut him off his finger and cast him away. Definitely not Jesus. But the book ends with a

prophet telling that awful man's grandson: "The ring is back on. You are the ring. The promise is in effect. David's house will rise."

Here is what you need to know about God. God thinks corporately, he thinks in terms of family line. God has a very long view of history, compared to the human view. His promises are often deferred. Every generation thinks they are the generation that will see the fulfilment of a promise but most of them are wrong, but some of them are not. Simeon and Anna saw the promise to David fall and rest upon Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Son of David who is also Son of God and all the promises of God are yes and amen in Him. They all come to rest on Jesus Christ. He is the promised son of Eve – that is why Luke traces his genealogy back to Adam and Eve and he is the promised son of David, that's why Matthew's genealogy is obsessed with David. All of the promises of God are yes and Amen in Christ. The timing of these promises is very mysterious, but the Word of the Lord is sure.

Now, very quickly:

What Do We Learn About Ourselves From The Book Of Haggai?

1. We are very much inclined to interpret discouragement as discharge from duty

The people in Haggai's day interpreted difficulty and discouragement as discharge from duty. It's hard, therefore it must not be God's will. Wrong! God often makes things hard just to see how much you want it. Headwinds serve to separate the enthusiastic from the committed. If you know God has told you to do something do not assume that difficulty is discharge. Do it until a clear word from God tells you to stop.

2. We are easily distracted and require frequent reminders

There was never an actual decision to stop building the temple. There was no town hall meeting or referendum it's just that when things got tough it became real easy to focus on other things. Houses needed to be built, families needed to be supported and it was just real easy to forget why God had sent them there in the first place. Houses and families constantly cry out for our attention and if we are not rigorously committed to the purposes of God those cries will become

our calling. Now, there is nothing wrong with caring for your family or building a house. But those things have to be secondary to the call of God on your life. You need to be constantly reminded of Divine Priority. That is why the Bible says:

²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25. NRSV)

You need weekly meetings and weekly reminders in order to stay on target. Vision leaks.

3. We will never be satisfied with work and wealth if we neglect the temple of the Lord

One of the more alarming features of this book is the unambiguous statement that God robs us of joy and contentment if we rob him of worship. Look at 1:6:

⁶ “You have sown much, and bring in little;
You eat, but do not have enough;
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;
And he who earns wages,
Earns wages *to put* into a bag with holes.” (Haggai 1:6. NKJV)

He literally and unapologetically says: “I will rob you of contentment and plunder your prosperity until you worship me and attend to my commandments.” That might explain why so many people are depressed today despite the fact that we seem to be living more comfortable lives than any other generation in human history. We eat but don’t feel full; we put on clothes but still feel cold. We save money but never have enough. Why? Because the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever and until you do that God is going to mess you up. The bottom line is that you will not enjoy your work or your wealth until God has the whole of your heart. When he does, he’ll turn around and bless you at work and at home but until then he is going to scatter what you gather and frustrate all your plans.

Finally and by way of closing we need to ask what manner of response is recommended by this text. If these things are true of God and these things are true of us, then how shall we respond?

How Shall We Respond?

1. By seeking first the kingdom of God

In the Old Testament and New Testament the word of God to his people is the same:

³³But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33. KJV)

You build God's house and he'll build yours. Now, I'm using the phrase "God's House" in the two ways it is used in the New Testament. In the New Testament we are told that we as individual believers are the temple of God as per 1 Corinthians 6:19, and we are told that we as the church are God's Temple as per 1 Corinthians 3:16. So when I say: "Build God's House" I mean that you build and invest in your relationship with him. You read his word, you pray, you serve, you grow. I also mean that you build this house. You build this church. You invest in his work and the glory of His Name in the city of Orillia. You do that FIRST, with the first fruits of your time, talent and treasure and I promise you this, he'll take care of the rest. Build his house and he'll build yours. And lastly,

2. By keeping our eyes on the promises and not on the problems

Haggai ends his book by telling a leader of God's people to not be distracted or disheartened by shakings in the heavens or on the earth. There will be disturbances but don't let them be discouragements. Nations will rise and nations will fall, there will be earthquakes and famines and plague but the end is not yet. God is in control and his promise is on the move. Keep your eye on the promises and not on the problems and do the work and endure the trials that he has decreed to be your way of life. Work; for He is with us. The promises of God are sure, even when they are long in appearing. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.