

# Haggai

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## Introduction

WHEN CONSIDERING the 4th and 5th chapters of the book of Ezra, we saw how the adversaries of God and of the remnant, who had returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and started to rebuild the temple, succeeded in stopping the work; and that God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, under whose ministry the work was restarted. Turning now to the book of Haggai, we may find instruction in what God said through him.

His prophecy is carefully dated, and noting this we see it divides into four sections, though all were uttered in the second year of Darius. The first utterance was on the first day of the sixth month (Hag. 1: 1): the second on the twenty-first day of the seventh month (Hag. 2: 1): the third on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month (Hag. 2: 10): the fourth, though distinct from the third, was given on the very same day (Hag. 2: 20). Our first remark must be that God always recognizes the validity of His own governmental actions. He had set Israel aside as a nation, and the times of the Gentiles had begun; hence the dating is that of the ruling Gentile power and not that of the Jews.

Has this point any significance for us? We believe it has. We live, as we believe, near the end of the sad history of the Church as a professing body on the earth, subject to God's holy government. Some idea of that government may be ours if we consider with care Revelation 2 and 3, where the Lord as a Judge surveys the seven churches, and speaks of such things as the removal of the 'candlestick' of light and testimony, and acting so as to 'fight against' the evil doers; and even when there is a measure of approval, it is only 'a little strength' and the minimum of faithfulness.

We shall do well if we remember this with much humility of mind. The overcomers in the seven churches are not exempted from the painful results of God's government, but must overcome in the conditions that prevail. The Apostle Peter had to say, 'the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God'; and nineteen centuries have passed since that was written. Here is a fact that bears upon much painful weakness that confronts us today.

Because of the weakness marking the returned remnant, God raised up Haggai. Because of the contrary edict of the new Persian king they had stopped the work on the house of God, and evidently without much concern they had started to build nice and comfortable houses for themselves. This being the case the prophet's first utterance was a word of rebuke.

## Haggai 1

THE PEOPLE ADOPTED a fatalistic attitude, saying, 'the time is not come . . . that the Lord's house

should be built'; and started to build up their own affairs. Some sixty years ago we heard Christians saying, in spite of the Lord's words in Acts 1: 8, that the time for the evangelization of the distant heathen was not come, and they settled down to build up their own spiritual affairs, as they considered them to be. It was not wrong for these Jews to build themselves some houses, but it was wrong for them to settle down to this and let the house of God lie waste, hence the drought, and God did 'blow upon' all their efforts.

It is not wrong for us today to care for our own spiritual state; indeed we are admonished. 'building up yourselves on your most holy faith' (Jude 20), but as the succeeding verses show, this is to be done as the fruit of the love of God, which expresses itself in 'compassion' upon some, and as to others saving them with fear. We are not to concentrate upon ourselves to the exclusion of God's work and God's interests today. The word of our Lord still stands, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you'.

Do we modern Christians require a word of rebuke, because we neglect God's interests in favour of our own interests? We fear that all too often we do. Let us accept the rebuke with the humility of mind that becomes us.

This is what the people did, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua, and they set to work in obedience to the word of the Lord. Haggai was to them the Lord's messenger, bringing them the Lord's message, and he gave them the assurance that God Himself was with them in the prosecution of the work. It was so pleasing to God, that the very day they recommenced the work is placed on record in the last verse of the chapter; exactly twenty-three days after the word of rebuke had reached them.

The assuring word from the Lord, 'I am with you', really settled everything. The Apostle could write, 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' and this, though stated in New Testament days, was just as true in earlier days. The people soon discovered that difficulties vanished when God was with them, as the book of Ezra has shown us. Their adversaries sprang to life directly the work recommenced, and reported their activity to headquarters, but another king was now on the throne in Persia, who rescinded the decree of Artaxerxes, and restored the original decree of Cyrus, under which the remnant had returned. So once more the voice of the Lord was being obeyed: and obedience is ever the way to blessing.

## Haggai 2

ABOUT FOUR WEEKS later there came another message from the Lord through the prophet Haggai, and this time it was a word of encouragement. It was specially addressed to the very old people, who might have some recollection of the magnificence of Solomon's temple, and consequently realize how inferior was any temple that they could hope to raise. The encouragement ministered was twofold. It had first a present aspect and then a future one.

But first let us note how this record bears upon ourselves today. There has been, in the history of the professing church some recovery of truth and some reversion to the simplicity of things, as ordered of God by His Spirit at the beginning, analogous to this return of a remnant to the place where God had placed His name, and had His house long before. The devoted saints of God, who had some part in this recovery, must surely have been conscious that anything of an outward nature into which they came, was far below the greatness of that which was established visibly on the Day of Pentecost, when three thousand were converted, and 'continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers' (Acts 2: 42). It would indeed be good if we today were fully

conscious of the smallness and feebleness of all that is in our hands, if compared with the greatness of that which originally was instituted of God.

And if we are duly impressed with this fact, and therefore liable to be somewhat depressed by the contrast we observe, we may be cheered as we discover how the word of encouragement ministered through Haggai, has a remarkable application to ourselves.

The encouragement in its present aspect we find in verses 4 and 5. Not only did God pledge His presence with them, but He added, 'The word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, and My Spirit, remain among you: fear ye not' (New Trans.). He cast them back upon the integrity of the word to direct their ways, which He gave at the beginning of His dealings with them, and the guidance and power of His Spirit, who was still among them. If we were asked what are the resources still available for saints today, we should have to answer that we still have the authentic word of God, dating, 'from the beginning', as the Apostle John so frequently reminds us in his epistles; and then that the Holy Spirit, who was shed forth on the Day of Pentecost, still indwells the saints, and therefore, if ungrieved, His power is still available for us. So we too need not fear, though opponents are many and difficulties persist.

As to the future there was also a word of encouragement though a time of judgment was to come. The very earth on which man lives, together with the heavens that envelop it, are to be shaken, as well as all the nations that inhabit it. The instability of themselves, and of all that surrounded them, had to be feared by the Jews of that day. And we have to face it also for as we reach the end of Hebrews 12, we find these words of Haggai quoted as applying to the end of the age. His words, 'Yet once', are quoted as, 'Yet once more', and therefore as applying to such a final removing of every shakeable thing, that it never needs to be repeated.

And when that great shaking takes place, 'the desire of all nations' will come and the house of God be filled with glory. Now Christ personally can hardly be spoken of as the 'desire' of all nations, since when He shall appear in glory, so that every eye sees Him, 'all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him' (Rev. 1: 7). But though this is so, the nations have ever desired such peace and fruitfulness, such prosperity, and quietness and assurance for ever, as is predicted in Isaiah 32: 15-18. These very desirable things will only come to pass and be enjoyed when the Lord Jesus comes again; and hence, we judge, this prophetic word does look on to the advent of Christ. When He comes, He will bring these blessings to men, and glory to the house of God.

The better translation of verse 9 appears to be, 'The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former'. The house of God in Jerusalem is considered as one, though broken down and rebuilt on several occasions, and the glory of its final form will outshine even its first glory as built by Solomon, when visible glory filled the building; so much so that the priests could not enter. That final glory was seen in vision by Ezekiel, as he records at the beginning of Ezekiel 43. We can thank God that the same thing will be true in regard to the church. Its latter end, when invested with the glory of Christ, will exceed all that marked it at the beginning.

One further item of encouragement was presented through Haggai — 'in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts'. Now we think it would be true to say that no city has had a more tempestuous history, and endured more sieges, than Jerusalem; indeed even today we hear Palestine spoken of as 'the cockpit of the nations'; and so indeed it is going to be, as Zechariah 14: 2 declares; yet the place of peace it will ultimately prove to be.

Now let us carefully note that all this blessing, glory and peace, to be reached after the predicted mighty shaking, is not going to be reached as the result of human effort or the fruit of human

faithfulness, for it is God declaring what He will bring to pass as the fruit of His sovereign mercy. The returned remnant had now responded to the word of rebuke and set their faces in the right direction, and what greater encouragement than for God to tell them, while still in felt weakness, what He proposed ultimately to bring to pass.

It is even so with us today. We are in weakness — and happy are we if it is felt weakness — but if our hearts are set in the right direction, seeking the furtherance of God's present work in grace, we may find great encouragement and joy as we consider the New Testament predictions as to the future glory of the church in association with Christ, reached according to God's sovereign purpose. We look, as Jude tells us in his epistle, for 'mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life'. We shall reach glory, not as the fruit of our merit, but of His mercy.

A little more than two months passed and then the Lord saw that the people, now busy in His work, needed another message and this time a word of warning. It was addressed more particularly to the priests though it concerned the work of all the people. Two questions were raised with them concerning their work: one recorded in verse 12, and the reverse question in verse 13. The priests had to admit that what is unclean and unholy is infectious and therefore defiling, what is holy and clean is not transmitted in the same way. Here is a matter of much importance from a spiritual standpoint.

The principle is illustrated even in natural things. Everyone knows that if a rotten apple is placed in a box of good ones, the rottenness will soon spread; whereas no one imagines that rotten apples will be made good by placing a few sound ones among them. In the temple service this matter had to be observed, and like all these outward observances under the law, the point has an inward and spiritual instruction for us. Let us heed it, since we have the defiling 'flesh' within as well as the defiling 'world' without.

The application that Haggai had to make of these questions was calculated to have a searching and sobering effect upon the people. Stirred up, as they had been, to put their hands to the work of building the house, there would have been a tendency towards self complacency as though all was as it should be. They were plainly told it was not so, but that what was imperfect and unclean marked their best work. A humbling lesson for them — and for us also. If some little reviving is granted to us today in the mercy of God, how easily the defilements of the flesh creep in: how quickly we may become like the early Christians in Galatia, who though beginning 'in the Spirit', proceeded as though they might be 'made perfect by the flesh' (Gal. 3: 3).

But having warned them as to the imperfection that marked their work, the prophet proceeded to assure them that in spite of it the blessing of God rested upon them. In contrast to the times of scarcity and blasting and mildew, that they had experienced while they neglected the house of God and set themselves to embellish their own houses, they now saw the hand of God working in their favour, giving them plenty of earth's good things. Thus it is today. There are elements of failure and uncleanness in all our service, but in spite of that, if the heart be right, we may expect spiritual blessing from God.

The frequent occurrence of the word, 'Consider', in this short prophecy is worthy of note. Twice in the first section did the prophet have to say to the people, 'Consider your ways'. And now in this later section the word occurs thrice — verses 15 and 18 — and we find the prophet saying in effect, 'Consider God's ways'. He delights to own any measure of energy and faithfulness in His service, even though there is a measure of uncleanness and failure connected with it, and to respond to it in blessing. In our present feebleness, conscious of failure, proceeding both from the flesh within and the world without, we may take much comfort from this.

The last section begins with verse 20. We have had, what we have ventured to call, the word of rebuke, followed by the word of encouragement, and then the word of warning. We now have what we may call the word of exaltation, addressed personally to Zerubbabel, who was a prince of David's line, as stated in Matthew 1: 12. The last verse of the chapter doubtless had some application to the man himself. Kingdoms would be overthrown, as predicted in Daniel 11, but he would be as a signet-ring, by which God would establish His decrees. How this worked out for Zerubbabel we know not, but we believe the Spirit of God had in view, not so much some temporary exaltation of this man, but the permanent exaltation of One whom he typified; even our Lord Jesus Christ.

Viewing it thus, we seem to have here an Old Testament forecast of what is more definitely stated when we read of our Lord that, 'All the promises of God in Him are Yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us' (2 Cor. 1: 20). Only here of course the thought is greatly amplified. Christ is He who will not only set forth and establish, as under the stamp of a signet-ring, all God's purposes, expressed in His promises, but also carry them to their fulness and completion so that at last the great 'Amen' can be said. The Apostle Paul added the words 'by us', because he was dealing there with what God had promised for the saints today, such as ourselves.

So Haggai finishes with a prediction that points to the coming exaltation of the One whom we worship as our Saviour and our Lord. He does so in a typical and symbolic way, some centuries before His first advent in lowly humiliation. We wait for their fulfilment in a far more glorious way than Haggai can have known, when at His second advent He appears in great glory.