

Haggai

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Section 10 of: **The Minor Prophets**

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This book is a witness how rapidly declension sets in, and fresh corruption follows upon restoration and blessing.

Return to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon was made at the opening of the Book of Ezra, *with great brightness and promise*. Thousands left Babylon; and they who remained behind helped them with their goods; and a general awakening of the national heart and energy was known.

The first business of the returned captives was to build the house of the Lord; and they laid the foundation of it in the midst of such mingled and diverse affections, as showed how thoroughly and personally they had set themselves to it. Tears and joys, shouts and wailings, told the living realities of the moment, and gave promise that an earnest-hearted work, then begun, would find its way happily and prosperously to the end. But it was not so. The promise was not made good. Is man's pledge, and promise, and stewardship ever realised? The Gentile seed which had been planted in the lands of the ten tribes became the occasion of hindrance and difficulty; and the building of the house is suspended, and that, too, for so long a time as fourteen years; during which interval, self-indulgence and consultation about their own things marked the moral ways of the people, of that people who had started so earnestly and so single-heartedly.

Under such conditions, the Spirit of God visits Haggai, and by him the word of the Lord addresses itself to Zerubbabel the chief of Judah, and to Joshua the high priest, and to the congregation of returned captives.

It was in the second year of Darius king of Persia, that Haggai was thus called forth by the Spirit. This notification of time has meaning in it. It bespeaks the degradation of Israel. The coin of the Roman is by and by to go current through the land, and Israel will then be taught by their land to accept that badge of their vassal-state; and so now the Spirit teaches them the like lesson, marking the eras of their history by the reign of the Persians.

Haggai begins by challenging the people on account of their neglect of God's house, and concern about their own houses; and he calls on them to take knowledge of their present condition as the consequence of this, and to mark how unequal the fruit they were gathering out of their fields and vineyards was to the toil they had spent upon them. And, under this rebuke, the people are brought afresh to the fear of God; and fear being awakened, the conscience being reached, the fallow-ground of nature ploughed up, the same voice of God by Haggai begins its ministry of comfort and encouragement. "I am with you, saith the Lord." But the Spirit visited the heart of the people, as well as the lips of the prophet, and the end of the ministry was therefore reached. "And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did work in the house of the Lord of hosts, their God."

The heart of Lydia, in other days, was opened by the Lord, as well as *the lips of Paul* that spoke to her. He spoke to her and she attended to him; and both of these things were of God. How simple, and yet how needful! The Lord lets us know the need of each of those operations in His

great discourse in John 6, teaching us that if the Father gave not to the Son, if He draw not, if He teach not, the ministry will be lost upon the soul, and the bread of life, the true manna of the desert, will be spread in vain.

Now, this was a revival, and reviving of God's work in the midst of the years became the necessary way because of the tendency to decline which is found to be in us. The sinner's utter ruin, and full incompetency to restore himself, is the ground of needed sovereignty at the first; (Isaiah 1: 9); the saint's or the church's tendency to slacken, to grow cold and dull, becomes the like ground of renewed, repeated revivals afterwards. A fresh putting forth of reviving virtue has been ever the way of maintaining a dispensation in any condition worthy of itself. And this day of Haggai was one of those revival seasons.

The subject of this prophetic word by Haggai might lead us to observe how perfect in their seasons the divine thoughts and purposes are, though so various and different. David proposed to build a house for the ark of God, a house of cedars, costly and stable, but Cue word of a prophet forbad him; the time had not come. There would have been moral unfitness in the ark taking its rest before Israel had reached theirs; or seating itself in a sure dwelling-place in a land as yet unpurged of the blood of the sword of battle. But in the day of Haggai, we find the contrary of all this. Israel are rebuked by a prophet for not building the house of the Lord. David erred in saying that the time had come for such a work; the returned captives now err in saying that the time had not come. And the Spirit of the Lord knew the times, and what Israel ought to do, whether to build or not to build. "God is a rock. His work is perfect." He is true, though every man be a liar.

But again, as we find also in the book of Ezra, the returned captives had refused the Samaritans, rejected alliance with people of such mixed blood and principles. They had done rightly in this — surely they had. They had kept themselves pure. But this was a provocation, and under the suggestions of those Samaritan adversaries, the great king, the Persian "breast of silver," had stopped the building of the house.

This, however, becomes a temptation. As soon as their hands get free of the work of the Lord's house, the people go, every one to his own house. How easy to understand this! Nature is ready to take all its advantages. We know this every day. But faith acts above nature. Paul, for instance, becomes a prisoner after he had been for years a servant. His activities abroad are stopped by the adversaries. But Paul, though a prisoner, though stopped in his work abroad, waits on the same Master still. There is prison-service, as well as field or pulpit-service. He will receive, at his own hired house, all that come to him, though he be in chains, and talk with them from morning till evening, expounding and testifying the kingdom of God, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. This was faith, not nature. But the returned captives employ their hands for themselves; tied up from working in God's house, they use them, as free, for the work of their own house; and thus Satan masters them as well as the Samaritans. And it is upon this condition of things the Lord breaks in by the voice of Haggai.

The building of the house, as I observed, seems to have been suspended for about fourteen years; but it is very happy to find that it was resumed, not by force of a decree in its favour by the great king, the Persian who had rule over the Jews at that time, but by the voice of the prophets of God, Haggai and Zechariah. The Lord, indeed, did dispose the heart of the king; but this was not till His prophet had disposed the heart of Israel. (See Ezra 5-6) And this is very much to be remembered in connexion with our prophecy. The fresh spring in the heart of the people was found to have been in God, and not in circumstances. It was God's voice by His prophets that set them on

work again, and not the royal favour of the Persian. The Lord turned the heart of the king their master to countenance them, when they had taken again the place of faith and obedience.

Haggai is simply styled, "Haggai the prophet." We have nothing about him more than that. The word of the Lord was delivered by him on several distinct occasions; but all in the second year of Darius the king of Persia: and all was directed to this end, to set agoing and to further the building of the house of the Lord.

I can look at them only in the most general way, noticing the time of each, during this second year of Darius the Persian.

6th month, 1st day. Haggai arouses the careless, self-indulgent people — the returned remnant, who were neglecting the Lord's house, and serving themselves.

6th month, 24th day. He promises them that the Lord will be with them; thus, as in the name of the Lord, appreciating the fear that had been awakened; and, consequently, the people begin to work.

7th month, 21st day. In order to encourage them in their work, Haggai tells them that the final glory of the house which they had now begun to build should be the brightest after the shaking of all things by the hand of the Lord.

8th month, 24th day. He leads the people to a humbling sense of what they had been ere the house of the Lord was attended to; but he tells them also of future blessing.

Same day. He addresses Zerubbabel, telling him again of the shaking of everything, and of the establishing of Zerubbabel as the Lord's signet.

These are his utterances in their seasons. The voice of the Lord by this prophet first awakens the conscience of the people, and then, in various ways of grace, encourages them in their revived condition and energy.

Let me observe, that the Spirit of God in the prophet does not take part, either with the aged man, who wept over the remembrance of *the past*, or with the younger ones who were rejoicing in *the present*; (see Ezra 3); but He bears the heart of the people on to *the future*. Those tears had been real, and were service to God; but neither were perfect. The Spirit who leads according to God indulges neither, but carries heart and hope forward. Encouraging the people in their work by His servant, He tells them of the future glory of the house, and of the stability of the true Zerubbabel, when all that has its foundation in the creation, be it what it may, shall be shaken to its removal and overthrow.

The Spirit again, in an apostle, comments upon this of the prophet. (See Heb. 12) He tells us, that all that which is to be shaken is "all that is made" — that is, as I judge, all that has not its root or its foundation in Him in whom "all the promises of God are yea and amen." He only is the rock. His work is perfect. Christ the Lord can say, and will say, "The earth and its inhabitants are dissolved; I bear up the pillars." What is of Him cannot be shaken. It remains. And in the faith and hope of what we have in Him, and from Him, beloved, let us say to one another, in the words of the apostle, "we, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear." Amen.