

SESSION TWENTY-SIX

HAGGAI

Rebuilding in the Face of Discouragement

INTRODUCTION

The author is consistently called "Haggai the prophet" (cf. Ezra 5:1; 6:14). The name Haggai (חַגַּי) means "festival." The book has five chronological references which become the basis for the outline of the book (1:1,15; 2:1,10,20). The book is dated in the 2nd year of Darius the Persian king, i.e., 520 BC (compare Ezra 4:24–5:2). At this point in time, the first of the exiles who returned after the Babylonian captivity had been back in the land for about eighteen years. Although they had started on the work of rebuilding the temple, they had set aside the task early on. Then, for sixteen years, the work of rebuilding the temple had been put on hold. Hence, the purpose of the book of Haggai was to stir up the people to rebuild the temple. This short book of only two chapters is organized around four messages that God brought through Haggai from August to December of 520 BC (see supplemental chart following this session).

I. MESSAGE ONE: CALL TO REPENT AND REBUILD THE TEMPLE (1:1-15)

A. The Message of Rebuke and Exhortation (1:1-11)

Due to pressures from the non-Jewish population of the land and other discouragements, the exiles who had returned to the land of Israel in 538 BC quickly abandoned their task of rebuilding the temple that had been demolished by the Babylonians. Although they had rebuilt the altar and the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3), by 536 BC they had abandoned the task. For sixteen years, the work went undone. But by the second year of the Persian king Darius (520 BC), the Spirit of the LORD moved two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir up the people to rebuild the temple.

Apparently the people had become indifferent to the rebuilding project (Hag 1:2), and their concern for their own "paneled houses" (1:4) was an evidence of wrong priorities. As a result, the LORD brought discipline upon the people to get their attention (1:5-7). This discipline was in the form of drought, inflation and a low food supply (cf. Deut 28–29 and the principles of blessing and curse).¹

LESSON: There are many lessons that could be drawn from this section. Basically, the people were disobedient, having become self-serving. This had resulted in a loss of God's blessing upon them. Likewise, if we are living just to take care of our personal needs and not God's interests, we may very well see God take away His blessing. Hence, we should renew our

¹There is an interesting wordplay in the Hebrew text that calls attention to the appropriate nature of their punishment. The people's interest was in the agricultural harvest, but God brought a "drought" (*ḥōrēb*). God's interest was in the temple, which lay desolate and had become a "ruin" (*ḥārēb*).

commitment to see God's work flourish, whether it be in regard to our local church or in regard to missionary endeavors that the Lord has burdened us for.

Notice that the rationale for rebuilding the temple was not just to reinstitute the sacrificial system! The temple was also for the glory of God (vs 8). Hence, the people should rebuild the temple, because God would be glorified in doing so.

B. The Response of the People (1:12-15)

Fortunately, the leaders and the people responded appropriately to Haggai's confrontation: they "obeyed the voice of the LORD their God . . . And the people showed reverence for the LORD" (vs 12). Notice the unity of their response! It is glorifying to God when people respond obediently.

In 1:13-15, we see God's reaction to their obedient response. First, He gave them an assurance that He was with them (vs 13). Second, He provided enablement in the form of stirring up the spirit of the leaders (vv 14-15). Indeed, we should be thankful to God that He raises up leaders that will prompt others to action.

II. MESSAGE TWO: PROBLEM OF DISCOURAGEMENT (2:1-9)

A. The Occasion for the Discouragement (2:1-3)

The chronological notice at 2:1 indicates the twenty-first day of the seventh month. This would have been the conclusion to the Feast of Booths (cf. Lev 23:34,39-44). The Feast started on the fifteenth of the month and lasted for seven days (concluding on the 21st). The Feast had a dual significance. It was both a remembrance of the time in the wilderness, as well as a time of joy (connected with the fall harvest). The 21st of the month should have been a time of joy and celebration, but it was hard to be joyful this particular year, as the people were discouraged. The primary reason for their discouragement lay in the comparison of their feeble efforts at rebuilding the temple with the glorious temple that previously existed (i.e., Solomon's temple). This reminds us that we can discourage ourselves by *unwarranted comparison*, when the real issue is whether or not we are at the point that the Lord wants us to be. Is He pleased with where we are and how we have done?

B. God's Encouragement for His People (2:4-9)

God's encouragement came in two forms, one regarding the near future (2:4-5) and another regarding the distant future (2:6-9). Both perspectives are needed!

1. Near Future (2:4-5)

The encouragement for the near future was the promise of God's continuing presence: "My Spirit is abiding in your midst" (note the participle, "is abiding"). Cf. 1 Chr 22:11; Ex 3:12; Josh 1:9; Deut 31:8. The point is that He would be with the postexilic community in the same way that He had been with Moses' generation.

LESSON: When we are discouraged in doing God's work, our greatest consolation is that He is with us. If we are looking for worldly motivation, we may easily become discouraged.

2. Distant Future (2:6-9)

God also said that He would "shake the heavens and the earth." A physical "shaking" may be intended (cf. Isa 2:19; 13:13; 24:18-20), but there will certainly be a political

shake-up of the Gentile powers. Notice that vs 7 emphasizes the political aspect, and this is confirmed again in 2:21-22. As a result of this future "shaking" (most likely in the Tribulation period or "Day of the Lord"), the Gentile nations shall contribute to God's temple. Then, the splendor of God's temple shall surpass even that of Solomon's temple. So, the people ought not to be thinking so much of the former temple as much as God's future plans for the temple. This passage probably has in mind the temple of the Millennial Kingdom (cf. Ezek 40-48).

INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM (vs 7): Notice that the translations significantly differ in regard to vs 7:

NIV = "the desired of all nations will come"

NASB = "they will come with the wealth of all nations"

NKJV = "they shall come to the Desire of all nations"

The *NIV* and *NKJV* would imply a Messianic reference (the "desired of all nations" = Jesus Christ). The Messianic reference could be taken in a couple of different ways. First, some would see this fulfilled by Christ in His 1st coming when He appeared at Herod's temple (cf. Mk 13:1). The problem with this view is that Haggai 2 is associated with universal judgment, which was not part of Christ's 1st coming. Second, some would see this fulfilled by Christ in His 2nd coming. This, too, has problems: (1) the verb in the Hebrew is in the plural (Heb יָבִיאוּ = "they will come"), and thus the subject is not singular, e.g., "the desired one"; and (2) the context is looking at *material wealth* (note vs 8 - silver and gold). Hence, the *NASB* translation is preferable at this point. The subject is not Jesus, but the Gentile nations who bring tribute to Him.

III. MESSAGE THREE: AN OBEDIENT RESPONSE HAS RESTORED THE NATION TO GOD'S BLESSING (2:10-19)

Message three is dated in the 24th of the ninth month of 520 BC, that is, about two months after the previous message which offered encouragement. This message is also a positive one, meant to affirm that God's blessing is upon them for obedience.

A. The Principle (2:10-13)

This message begins with Haggai being instructed to ask the priests certain questions concerning ritual consecration and defilement. To understand the point, however, one must know some things about the cultic background of the nation.

The reference to "holy meat" (*NIV* = "consecrated meat") refers to meat that has been properly sacrificed and roasted (see Lev 6:24-27a,29). Hence, it is ceremonially clean, and the garment of the priest which touched the consecrated meat would also be considered "clean" (i.e., the meat would not be defiled by the priest's garment). However, the consecrated meat would not *transmit* "cleanness" to other objects or foods. Although "cleanness" cannot be transmitted, things can readily become ceremonially "unclean" (Num 19:11-16,22).

B. The Application (2:14-19)

1. The Previous Experiencing of God's Discipline (2:14-17)

How do the questions about "cleanness" relate to Israel's present situation? Like touching a corpse, the people had become *defiled* in God's sight. As a result, their sacrifices were

ineffectual (vs 14), as evidenced by God's discipline (vv 16-17). Nevertheless, there is hope. Uncleanness does not have to be permanent; it can be changed. So, too, the people can be restored to the Lord and His favor.

2. Restoration of the Nation to God's Blessing (2:18-19)

Their obedient response (the initial steps of rebuilding the temple) is going to change things. The barns may still be empty because of past crop failures, but that is now changing. In God's eyes, their obedience has rendered them "clean" from their defilement. They are now in a position to be blessed again.

LESSON: God's discipline is intended to draw us back to Him, not simply to punish us or keep us in a state of discipline. God is very eager to bless us, and He will do so when we turn to Him in faith and obedience (that is not to say, however, that we will escape all the consequences of our sin).

IV. MESSAGE FOUR: GENTILE POWERS WILL BE OVERTHROWN AND ZERUBBABEL HONORED (2:20-23)

The final message is directed to Zerubbabel in particular. Once again, God calls attention to His divine activity in which He is going to "shake the heavens and the earth" and "overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations" (cf. 2:6). Primarily, this is going to be a political shakeup. In light of the universal nature of this prediction, this does not seem to refer to any event in Haggai's day. On the other hand, the terminology does seem reminiscent of the destruction of Gentile world powers that had been predicted in Nebuchadnezzar's dream image. The main point of God's revelation through this image was to highlight the worldwide Messianic kingdom that would *replace* the Gentile kingdoms (Dan 2:34-35,44-45). Therefore, Haggai 2:21-22 probably refers to the Tribulation period when God will bring judgment upon Gentile kingdoms in preparation for the Millennial Kingdom. In Rev 11:15, we read in anticipation of the soon-coming victory of Jesus Christ, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."

The difficulty with this passage, however, is how this relates to Zerubbabel, for vs 23 states,

"On that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant,' declares the LORD, 'and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you,'" declares the LORD of hosts."

If the context refers to the eschatological "day of the Lord," how would this relate to Zerubbabel? Because of the eschatological association, many scholars interpret this as a promise to be fulfilled with Messiah. But there is little in the text to confirm this suggestion (despite the fact that "My servant" could have allusions to the Servant Oracles of Isaiah).² Probably this is a promise to Zerubbabel personally that He will be blessed and rewarded in the future Messianic Kingdom. Daniel 7:27 revealed that the "saints" would be given the kingdom with the "Son of Man." Furthermore, Dan 12:1-2 revealed that the Old Testament believers would be resurrected after a time of great tribulation. After the Tribulation, when Messiah's Kingdom has been established on earth,

² The expression "my servant" occurs at least 73 times in the Bible. A survey of the usage shows that this is not an exclusive Messianic title, as several biblical figures are referred to in this way, including Abraham (Gen 26:24), Moses (Num 12:7), David (2 Sam 7:5) and Job (Job 1:8).

Zerubbabel would be singled out for special honor. God said to him, "I will make you like a signet ring (Heb כִּתְּרִינָה)." Baldwin notes,

The signet ring, engraved with the king's seal, was used to endorse all official documents (*cf.* Est. 8:10). It was so precious that, to guard it against theft, it was usually worn on the king's person.³

Zerubbabel, in his generation, was being faithful to lead the people in the rebuilding of the temple. Though it would in no way compare with the former temple and though the time had not come to fill God's temple with "glory," Zerubbabel would one day be resurrected and given a position of great honor for faithfully serving the Lord in his day. One should note that a similar promise was given to Daniel at the close of the great prophetic book bearing his name (12:13).

³Joyce Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Tyndale Commentaries (Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 54.