

HAGGAI COMMENTARY

“LET’S REBUILD THE TEMPLE”

I imagine most, if not all, readers will know about the “Exile” experienced by the Jews. The northern kingdom was taken away into captivity by Assyria around 722 B.C. Judah, the southern kingdom, lasted after that until 586 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon finally conquered Jerusalem, carrying many away into captivity to Babylon. This included kings and prophets, as well as many others. Best known among the deportees were Daniel, Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego), and the prophet Ezekiel. Jeremiah prophesied before and during the Babylonian assault. In his prophecy he noted that the exile would last 70 years (Jeremiah 25). Babylon had fallen to the Medo-Persian Empire by then, and God used Cyrus to offer the Jews the opportunity to return home, even calling Cyrus “My Shepherd” and “His anointed” (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle some events around the return to Judah, and the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi ministered to the returnees, making them “post-exilic” prophets.

I remember my first sighting of Jerusalem in January, 1993. What a beautiful vision met my eyes; the city of gold literally looked that way with the setting sun reflecting off the buildings, all of which by law had to be covered with “Jerusalem stone.” I shall always cherish the view that met my eyes that day. When the Jews returned, they must have been somewhat dismayed at the sights they saw. The once proud walls around the city were in piles of stone rubble. The Temple that adorned the 2,600 feet tall Mount Moriah was gone! Fire left the fallen stones smutty and black. Yet they set about to restore this great city and its focal point of the Temple. But they languished in the effort, and the job was much delayed. Local opposition to the building projects was too easily bowed down to, as people forgot that the great glory of Jerusalem was not the beauty of a building, but the presence of Yahweh there! Our prophet, Haggai, came to stir up the hearts of the people and get things going again. Zechariah would soon join him. Ezra and Nehemiah were also great leaders in motivating the people to return to their task, the task God led Cyrus to set them on.

CHAPTER 1

For about 15 years the work on the Temple had lagged behind, virtually at a standstill. The neglect of the people to do this great work needed to be seen as sin, and Haggai would help them see it that way. Haggai’s declarations were a mixture of censure for the failure and encouragement to return to the work. He was the man with the right message for the time.

THE PROPHET’S REBUKE; THE PEOPLE’S RESPONSE

THE COMFORT OF THE PEOPLE

1) When he came to the throne, Cyrus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (44:24-45:6) from a century and a half earlier that as God’s “shepherd,” he would use his royal authority to effect the return and rebuilding. About a decade and a half has now passed since 50,000 Jews did return to Judah and Jerusalem, but the work on the Temple was sadly lagging behind the work on individual domiciles. Now God’s Word comes through Haggai to the governor of the land and the high priest. If the people are going to be compelled to build, their civil and spiritual leaders are going to have to participate in the messaging. So, Governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua join in the word and the work. It is past time to get on with this project, so the prophets stir the people.

2) The problem that Haggai addressed was the slothfulness of the people in the rebuilding of

the Temple. Again he rests on the word of the LORD of Hosts (Yahweh Sabaoth) as his authority, and he indicts the people for procrastinating in this most important matter. Like Felix in Paul's time, they were looking for a more convenient season. When God has something for us to do now, to "put it off" until later is essentially to say "No" to God's call. Let us not delay in doing God's work in God's time, not when we think it will be more convenient.

THE CALL OF THE PROPHET

3), 4) Haggai seems hung up on "the word of the LORD" (what a great hang-up!). Yahweh found here a willing vessel to give out His word. May we be so willing to declare to this world what "thus saith the LORD." In this case God's word was that the people had put their own houses (and the beautifying of them) ahead of the house of God. His Temple foundations had been laid, but at the first sign of trouble, the builders went into the residential business and forsook God's house of worship. God's accusation is a searching question, *"Is it time for you to make luxuriant dwellings for yourselves while doing nothing to make a dwelling for me?"* The present-day applications are endless. How many ways have we found to put ourselves ahead of the Lord? If (when) we do that, is He then truly our Lord?

5) For the first of five times, Haggai uses the expression *"Give careful thought to your ways."* This is again God's word, "Think about what you are doing!" If only we could wrestle the minds of people away from the power of Satan long enough to get them to do just that! A reappraisal of priorities and values is greatly needed today. We do well at all times to consider what the Lord says. His Word will definitely ***judge us then***; it should also *guide us now*.

THE CAUSE OF THEIR PROBLEMS

6) Through His prophet, the Lord addresses five areas of life for the Judeans that illustrate the futility of their twisted values. In each of them they put forth sufficient, if not abundant, effort for fulfillment of their own personal plans and satisfying of their individual desires, but they consistently and frustratingly come up short of satisfaction.

"You sow much; you harvest little."

"You eat, but you remain hungry."

"You drink, but never slake your thirst."

"You get dressed, but you are yet cold."

"The holes in your purse make you lose your wages."

You live with constant futility because you have not kept the main thing in view. I wonder if Jesus had this in mind when He challenged His hearers to place the things of God as their priority, and then all the things they needed would be theirs (Matthew 6:33). True satisfaction in life can only be found in the Lord Jesus.

7) Space in the volume of Holy Scripture is at a premium; our God never wastes words. When He says something five times in a book as brief as Haggai, we may understand that He is placing great emphasis on it. He wanted them to practice some personal reflection concerning their failure to do His will. Why don't ***you and I*** slacken ***our*** busy pace in the maddening race of life and ***reflect*** more on the eternal value of what we are doing?

8) Haggai has soundly rebuked them for what they had ***not*** done; he had declared the futility of what they ***had*** done. Now Yahweh challenges them in the matter of what they ***should*** be doing, and that was rebuilding the Temple of God to His glory. Building fine homes was for the pleasure and honor of the owners; it was far past time to consider the pleasure and honor of the LORD God, and to build ***His*** house that would please and honor ***Him***. There, His people could worship and praise. There, the nations of the world could have "a house of prayer."

9) Haggai returns here to the theme of verse six - the ineffective efforts of the people to prosper materially while they neglected spiritual values. God tells them clearly that it was ***He***

who caused their economic woes, and that **He did it** specifically because they fixed their hearts on their own houses and not on **His**. God's chastening is never an accident! When His people are disobedient, they (we) leave Him no choice but to deal sternly with us. Goodness and mercy are like little sheep dogs; they ever nip at our heels to bring back into the fold of God. Our Heavenly Father will work tirelessly to guide us into the path of blessing. He will allow us the misery of failing in what we do if we are out of His will.

10) If you follow Middle East weather, you know that Israel's rainy season is November through February. There have been some record rains in recent winters, a cause for much rejoicing! But in the off-season, and before the days of irrigation, there was the need for heavy dew to sustain the crops. In this case, the absence of the dew from heaven was a direct result of the disobedience of the people. Let us **obey** Him and be blessed in so doing. AS the poet wrote, "There shall be showers of blessing..."

11) Actions have consequences. In the divine economy for Israel, Yahweh had called for the heavens to not yield their moisture upon the earth. In the law (Deuteronomy 28: 23, 24) God had warned the people that their sins could and would precipitate the lack of precipitation! And so it came to pass! While God generally deals with His children differently than that today, we can still see the consequences of our actions played out in the Divine dealings.

THE CORRECTION OF THE PROBLEM

12) Here is a marvelous thing! The civil ruler, the religious leader, and the whole congregation of Israel decided it was time to obey God. They listened to and obeyed the voice of the prophet - Why? Because the Lord had sent him! God is sending His spokesmen today, calling on His people to turn from their sins and follow Him! We should pray for revival in our often self-centered churches, as well as for a spiritual awakening in our land. God wants to bless us more than we desire to be blessed; let us obey and watch His open heaven's windows.

13) What a glorious epithet that would be for any servant of the Lord - "**Haggai, the Messenger of the Lord.**" The prophet was one who got a message from God and delivered it to God's people. Often it involved pointing out their sins and calling them to repent. This message from the prophet was simply that the Lord was present with them. Would this stir them to proper action? Would they take courage in His presence and power? God is still with His people, residing in temples of flesh, our bodies. Does that knowledge challenge us to practice holy living?

14) This is very much a repetition of verse twelve. If the Lord does not stir us, we will not be stirred. While Haggai spoke the message, it was God who stirred hearts. Oh, that today God would send a prophet like Haggai to point out the sins of the church and of the nation and to call us to repentance! We need a heart-stirring, mind-changing, life-shaking revival in the Church today. We have been **sub-normal** for so long that if someone comes along who really acts **normal**, we are likely to think they are **abnormal**! Where are the giants in the pulpits? Where are the soul-winners and the prayer-warriors in the pews? May God be pleased to help us find those who will lead us like the governor and the priest led them!

15) From the beginning of Haggai's prophecy to the start of construction took just over three weeks. This is a marvelous response, since there were harvests of figs and grapes to be gotten in, not to mention the planning of the work and gathering of materials. We must applaud the people's response! How blessed if we today would so work!

CHAPTER 2

It appears clear to me that this description of a Temple to be built is prophetic of the millennial

Temple. The newly built second Temple, phase one, could not compare in glory with the Solomonic Temple from four centuries earlier. The real glory of the Temple, however, was not the size or grandeur of the edifice; it was rather in the presence of Yahweh at that place. That presence meant this was a place of glory, even though it compares unfavorably to its earlier counterpart. The dialogue suggested with the priests demonstrates how easily defilement can spread in contrast with then need for divine intervention for holiness to be had. A disobedient people had suffered from God's smiting them with loss - now becoming obedient, they will find God's blessing instead of cursing. In the last days men shall know that Israel is God's chosen, as when they come to faith, He will bless them marvelously.

A TEMPLE BLESSED BY THE PRESENCE OF GOD

DISCOURAGING COMPARISON

1), 2) The writer to the Hebrews said that God had spoken to the fathers by the prophets. Surely he included Haggai in that statement; God's word comes through him again, seven weeks after the first message came. Before he had only spoken to leaders; now he addresses the people as well. God has messages for the rulers, but He does not exclude us common folk from His utterances. These are the ones who had returned from the Babylonian captivity, and many of them are the old heads who had gone into that exile under Nebuchadnezzar. The group is called the "remnant." God always has a faithful remnant. They had remained faithful to God. In this twenty-first century world that has moved so far away from God, may we who know Jesus be a faithful remnant within the church.

3) Here Yahweh asks a strange and seemingly discouraging question, "Do you remember Solomon's Temple? This one isn't much by comparison, is it?" It was good for them to face the truth that in outward splendor, their Temple was pretty poor. Maybe aged Haggai was among those who 66 years ago saw the glory of Solomon's grand edifice. In the era of the church, we do well to remember that the glory of God in the body of Christ is not about the size of the meeting house. Nor is it true that the location in a fine neighborhood makes the church more glorious. The gathering of believers should always be to the praise and glory of God, no matter the size of the group or its location when meeting. It is about the presence of the Lord among His people. It is about the sincerity of their prayers to Him and their praise of Him.

DIVINE CHALLENGE

4), 5) The important issue wasn't the beauty of man's construction, but the glory of God's presence. The governor, the high priest, and the people are spoken to by Yahweh in words of encouragement. Three things are emphasized: 1) Be strong, don't let appearance weaken your spirit. 2) Work, don't give up the effort. 3) I am with you. God had promised when He brought them out of Egypt that He would remain with them. Now that He has brought them out of Babylon, that promise has not changed. In verse 9 Haggai assures them that this Temple will see greater glory than the last one. It happened this way - five centuries later Herod came along and expanded and beautified Zerubbabel's Temple. But the real glory came when David's greater-than-Solomon Son stood there - the Lord Jesus Christ! And the greatest glory is yet to come, when Jesus comes back in glory.

DISTANT (FUTURE) COMFORT

6), 7) The "shaking" of the material universe appears to speak of things connected to the even now yet future return of Christ. The Revelation describes such things in vivid terms - earthquakes, plagues, widespread death, astral bodies falling to earth, and so much more. God Who made this universe has no trouble "shaking" it when He chooses! Verse seven may have a dual fulfillment, if the old scholars who saw Messianic hints here are correct - the

“Desire of Nations” they saw as the Savior. Jesus came to Herod’s Temple, and He will also come to one that is yet to be built! If later interpreters who see “what is desired” as wealth, then the tribute of the Gentile nations coming to the Millennial Temple may be seen, as well as the Glory that Jesus brings by His presence there! So, don’t be disheartened by comparing the past with the present - the best is yet to come (for us all!).

8), 9) After possibly giving the post-exile Jews a glimpse into the distant future’s glory, Haggai returns to the issue of discouragement at the lesser glory of the Temple presently before the people. It’s as if He said, “Yes, Solomon’s Temple, with its silver and gold, was grander than this. And all those things are still mine; but I will bring to this house greater glory than Solomon’s Temple ever saw! My Son will grace this place, and that will make it the most glorious Temple of all! The Baby Jesus was brought there, and the Boy Jesus amazed the scholars there, then the Christ came there and cleaned the place up. To Haggai’s hearers he said, “The Best is yet to come!”

In the post-captivity period, about 50,000 Jews had accepted the offer of Cyrus to return to Jerusalem with the express purposes of rebuilding the Temple and repatriating themselves as citizens of God’s chosen place for Abraham’s descendants to live. They started well, but then they got more interested in building their own residences than the Residence of God, and so the project was put on hold for years, perhaps as long as 16 years! God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to stir up the citizenry to return to the important task of rebuilding the Temple. When this chapter’s message is received from God by Haggai, the work on the Temple had been resumed for about three months. Now the prophet wants to talk to them about a higher subject than just doing the work of God - doing it with pure hands.

THE PURSUIT OF GOD AND OF HOLINESS

THE CONDITION OF DEFILEMENT

10) God often nails down dates for us in the prophetic writings. This is one such case. Several commentators suggest that this is December 18, 520 B.C. It is early winter in Judah, and the winter crops have received the early rains (often called the “former” rains). “*The Word of the Lord came to Haggai;*” this is such a powerful statement! It is such a blessing that God has chosen to reveal truth to mankind. In this case, He unveiled truth to a prophet who would then speak this truth (as well as write it) to the people of God. The written Word, preserved by God through the ages, comes down to us.

11) God refers to Himself here as “*Yahweh Sabaoth*,” the Lord of Armies, the Lord of Hosts, or as translated here, the LORD Almighty. This is not a “suggestion” from some underling; this is an order from on high, and from the Highest of those on high! The people of Judah must not take this lightly. There is a hypothetical question about the law to be asked, and it is to be taken the Priests, those who were the authorities on things in the law. God had tasked these descendants of Aaron to be teachers of the Law to the people of God (Leviticus 10:8-11).

12) This question seems a little strange to twenty-first century believers, but let’s try to get into the skin of the Jew in the first century, one who is still living under the Law of Moses. While the altar may have sanctified the meat offered on it (Exodus 29:37), and the meat, in turn, could sanctify (make holy) a garment that it touched (Leviticus 6:24-27), that garment would not sanctify something else by touching it. Holiness is not so easily passed on and on. There needs to be fairly close contact to the original source of sanctification. We might make the application that a child cannot come to God through their parents, but as their parents do, they must come to God through Jesus.

13), 14) It is an altogether different story with defilement than with sanctification. Defilement is so much more easily communicated than is sanctification! Numbers 19:11 speaks of the

defilement one would get by touching a corpse; verse 22 tells how that defilement is passed on to anyone he touches! The infectiousness of sin and its defilement are part of its evil and danger. God's people had so defiled themselves with sin as to go into a seven-decade captivity. Now, though they seemed to be cured of idolatry, sin was still a problem - it just had other manifestations. Just as a dead body could defile the person who touched it, so the spiritually defiled sinner defiles things he touches, even sacrifices on the altar! Let us as Christians seek to spread holiness through faith in the Savior instead of spreading defilement, which seems to be the "world's" main occupation.

THE CALL TO RETURN TO GOD

15), 16), 17) Through Haggai, God challenges the people to think. Five times they are called to "give careful thought," or "consider your ways." If a person will only stop to think, and think about truth, they will likely turn to God and His ways for them. Our job is to present them with the truth of God's Word, and to live it before them so they can see the reality of a life changed by the grace of God. Here is Haggai's thought challenge: before you began the work on the Temple, did you notice how your efforts were unproductive? Did you not see how things wasted away? You left twenty measures of grain in storage, but when you came back, there were only ten. Yahweh kept them from seeing productivity in the fields or conservation in the barns. The blight, mildew, and hail that God sent were destructive to an agricultural society like Judah's. God's purpose was to draw men to Himself. Sometimes **sorrow** is His preferred method (2 Corinthians 7:10); for them, it was the sorrow of not having enough grain and oil to sustain their lives! At other times His **goodness** is the tool that brings us that change of mind we call "repentance." Paul wrote in Romans 2:4, "...the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance." Which way is He calling you today, with sorrow or goodness? Will you answer?

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REPENTANCE

18), 19) What wonderful words are these, "*From this day on!*" Divine judgment has brought drought and near famine. Disobedience must be dealt with, and God has done so. Now He graciously calls to them again, asking them to "*consider their ways,*" to think about their behavior and its banquet of consequences. "Mark the calendar," He says. "Note that from this day on things are different. Previously your staple crops have been lacking; there is hardly any seed in the barn. But watch things change. Your change in behavior, begun by your repentance, will bring to you a new and wonderful banquet of good consequences." He concludes thus, "*From this day on I will bless you.*" O, that we today would consider our ways! That we would be more concerned about purity of life than purity of air and water! May God grant us national repentance to know and to love and to follow Him.

20), 21), 22) Yahweh is pleased again to relate a message to Governor Zerubbabel through His prophet. People need encouragement, and they often receive it from their leaders. There are also times when leaders need to be lifted in their spirits. This message from Yahweh might be just what the governor of Judah needed - Matthew 6:8, "...*your Father knows what things you need before you ask Him.*" The promise to shake heavens and earth goes beyond a simple earthquake; God is going to shake things up among the kingdoms of men! Daniel's dream, as well as that of Nebuchadnezzar foretold a series of empires, with each one falling before the one following it. Does this portend beyond things that have already happened? Does it speak of yet future events that involve military conquests and losses? Could we be looking at events spoken of by John in the latter pages of Revelation? The answer is "Yes."

23) One wonders if this man Zerubbabel knew the great part he played in God's unfolding drama of redemption! Mentioned in the lineage of Messiah (Matthew 1:12,13), here he is brought into that fraternity of men whom God called "*my servant.*" Others forming that

estimable group include Moses, David, Joshua, and even Jesus the Messiah! For some thoughts on the import of the phrase "signet ring" look at Jeremiah 22:24, 25. Was this a reversal of what God did concerning Coniah in that passage? If so, what comfort this would have been to the governor! Haggai had done his good work for God and for man.