

The Message of Haggai for Today

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Historical Situation

After the Babylonian exile ended, God's people returned to Jerusalem (around 536 BC). The first order of business was to reestablish the worship of God in a rebuilt temple. However, a combination of factors stalled the work. First, there was the people's inactivity, either from selfishness in wanting to build their own homes first (1:4) or from a sense of hopelessness that the second temple would not come anywhere near the first in glory (2:3). Added to this was an incorrect view of the temple's significance, tied to its magnificence.

In other words, the people seemed to believe that the temple's magnificence guaranteed God's presence there. Second, there were opponents of the Lord's work (2:22). The people's priorities were wrong: they feared men rather than God and placed their own comfort and priorities before the worship of God.

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The book of Haggai is centred on the temple. However, it is not merely about the temple and its rebuilding. The temple stands for union with the covenant God. God's aim in this prophecy is to direct the people's gaze forward in time towards a greater glory than they have ever known. For them, the best is yet to come.

In the opening of the book (1:1-6), the equivalent of a king (Zerubbabel) and a priest (Joshua) receive the Word of God. The leadership of Judah is meant to tell God's people what their proper priorities should be. The people had been busy building their own houses, even to luxurious specifications. They had put their relationship with God on hold, putting their work and houses first. Their priorities were wrong. In a way, Jesus's exhortation on priorities can be seen as a commentary on the message of Haggai: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the

things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6:33-34). Haggai, therefore, has much to say to us about our goals in life.

In the second part of the chapter (1:7-11), the Lord tells the people how to address the problem. They are to reorient their priorities towards the things of God and to build the second temple. This is accompanied by a reminder of the consequences of ignoring God's instructions (1:9-11).

The people respond in faith and obedience (1:12-15). They begin building. Compared with 2:1, we can infer that they kept it up for about a month. Their attention and strength flagged because they still laboured under misimpressions about the nature of the temple and the God they were supposed to meet there.

The heart of the book of Haggai lies in 2:1-9. In this section, the Lord reminds them of the glory of the first temple and directly addresses the people's fears that the second temple won't measure up to the first. Far from not measuring up, the second temple will greatly surpass the first! They should have known this if they had recalled the covenant God made with them at Sinai (2:5). God's Holy Spirit would not leave them. From apparently small beginnings, God would bring about something that would shake the heavens and the earth. The exegesis of 1:6-7 compelled Charles Jennens to include these words in the libretto that George Handel would set to music in *The Messiah*. The promise of peace is the culmination of the shaking.

In 2:10-19, the people are reassured that past judgments from God (10-19) would not dictate future blessings (19b). The people were unclean. However, if God were to change those circumstances, there would be nothing but blessing in the future. The people, their work, and their offerings are all currently unclean (2:14). There needs to be cleansing, just as we also need the cleansing power of Christ's blood.

Lastly, Zerubbabel, the governor, receives reassurance from God that the shaking will not be of Judah, but of the nations (2:22), and that Zerubbabel will be as a signet. The signet was the seal that could be worn about the neck or as a ring on the finger. Officials used them to indicate to the recipient of a letter who the sender was. Not only was the genuineness of the letter thus guaranteed,

but there was also proof that the letter had not been tampered with.

Jesus Christ, the New Temple

The glory that was coming could only be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The second temple itself was not breathtakingly glorious, especially when compared with Solomon's temple. The desire of all nations (2:7) refers to a person whom all nations will seek. This will shake everything up. Priorities will be realigned. Jesus's contagious holiness will be the answer to the contagious uncleanness of humanity and of God's people (2:11-14). The message for God's people today is to seek first Jesus Christ, His kingdom, and His righteousness, and all the other things we need will be provided by God in His own good time. In what will we invest?

What will be our goals in life? Some of the most fundamental questions we can ask ourselves find answers in this short but important minor prophet.

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