

From This Day Forward

Haggai 2: 15 - 19

** “Now give careful thought to this from this day on - consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord’s temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord.

** ‘From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.

“From this day on I will bless you.”

**We don’t know very much about the prophet Haggai. He may have been one of the captives taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, but that is just speculation. We really know him only through his prophecy, which is just two chapters long. There is no indication that he served as a Hebrew Priest, or in any other specific official ‘capacity’ in the community – he was simply a man who found the Spirit of God upon him, called to deliver a very specific message to God’s people. He was a prophet.

Haggai’s ministry began about sixteen years after the return of the Jews to Judah from their exile in Babylon. Now, it’s important to at least try and visualize what was going on in Haggai’s world. When the Babylonian, and later the Assyrian armies laid siege to his land, and particularly to Jerusalem, the end result was widespread devastation. Huge numbers of people - especially

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anyone with skills, with education, the leaders, etc. – were deported (exiled). And, typical of the warfare of the day, these armies practiced their version of a ‘scorched earth’ strategy... so, there was very little left in Israel. (All of this was predicted in quite some detail by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, who described a land that would quickly revert back to a near feral state – with wild animals taking over, and thorn bushes and weeds consuming the farmland, and the like. This all happened.)

The greatest concentration destruction was in Jerusalem, which was the capital of Judah. It was important, obviously, for an invading army to ‘put their heel on the throat’ of the vanquished, and let them know who the new boss in town was! So, Jerusalem was not just conquered, it was *dismantled*, with particular attention being paid to the great Temple of King Solomon.

This was because the Temple was the absolute center of life for the Hebrew people. This is where they worshiped – the *only* place they could worship! This was where the feasts were kept, where the priests worked, where the sacrifices were made, and on and on. Everything in this Nation centered on the Temple.

The pre-exile Jews looked at the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem in an almost magical way – believing that as long as the Temple was standing, they would be protected from any enemies, no matter what they did, and they believed the Temple was indestructible. The prophet Jeremiah had quite a bit to say about that – i.e., that this was a bad assumption, and he predicted both the destruction of the Temple and the fall of the city, all of which came to pass.

The exile lasted about 70 years, and then, when the Persians conquered the Assyrians, the captive Jews were looked on with, if not favor, at least with some tolerance. And they were eventually allowed to begin to return to their Land. Which is where we find Haggai appearing on the scene.

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** The work of rebuilding that temple had begun shortly after the return of the people to the land. There was no 'Israel' without a Temple. Basically, a foundation was laid. But then the work hit a lull, due to the opposition of the Samaritans (the people who had 'filled in the void while the Hebrews were in Exile - the locals who had intermarried with those who were not exiled). Plus, the people got kind of preoccupied with building their own lives, building their own houses, taking care of themselves. That initial fervor for the Temple quickly died down.

But after eighteen years, the rebuilding effort was resumed through encouragement of Haggai and another prophet, Zechariah. They challenged the people, 'woke them up', and persuaded them to take advantage of the newfound support of the Persian government under Darius the Great.

Haggai's message is brief and to the point - filled with an urgency for the people to proceed with the rebuilding of the second Jerusalem temple. And that's what we read in the short example in today's Scripture.

** (blank) Now, when approaching a passage like this one, to find application for today, we really need to be cautious. It is usually not a good idea to rip an Old Testament passage out of its context and apply it directly to us today. Why not? Well, we read Haggai's prophecy and we can see immediately that he is speaking from the perspective of the 'old covenant' (which is what 'Old Testament' means).

See, this was a time before the coming of Jesus, before the 'age of Grace', where the belief was that God blessed people (and nations) on the basis of their works; and likewise, God punished them for their disobedience - directly and immediately. Now, of course Haggai would preach that message, because from Abraham and Moses, to the prophets (Major and minor) God allowed this concept to take root among the chosen people - because it was enforcing the *eternal* spiritual **principle that **everyone is responsible for their choices**. That is still true, but, in the OT days, the consequences were seen as much more direct. They were immediate. There was also a direct

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cause and effect between the blessing of the nation of Israel and its obedience, because Israel was a theocracy (i.e., under the direct rule of God.) So, the prophets taught - that God allowed (arranged for these people) to be taken into exile because of their sin and disobedience.

So, the understanding was - if you're obedient, your life will go well. Your borders will be secure, your land will bear much fruit, you'll have a lot children, your wife will be happy all the time, and life will be good. If you are disobedient, if you fail to keep God's Law, all bets are off - and so we hear Haggai telling the people, "Look at the situation we're in *right now*. Before you began to work on the Temple, you were suffering here! You had half the grain you needed, less than half of the wine... and what you did harvest was blighted with mildew and hail. And now...

** "...give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit." (vs. 18)

His implication is clear: the food is running out, friends. And things are this way because we've been ignoring the Temple of God. We haven't been worshipping, we've been focused on our fear of the neighbors, and our own comfort and so God is punishing us for it. We're out from under the 'umbrella of blessing.'

Now, what Haggai is saying is something that we do not teach in the Christian church today. (At least, most of us! I don't count the cable TV preachers as 'us'!) Today, we understand that the age of Law has been superseded by the age of Grace. So we see the world differently. The world *is* different! So, thank God, when **we** mess up, when we don't keep the Law (which will happen to all of us - just like in the OT days) there is now a provision of forgiveness. God took our penalty, God took our sins upon himself so that we could be set free (as Paul says) "From the law of sin and death."

So it's a different world today, but there are still some important applications to be made from Haggai's prophecy to our lives. I already shared one of those - which is, that "we are all

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responsible for our own choices." That has never changed. And that includes the choice of accepting or rejecting the means of our rescue in Jesus Christ.

But there is another application, a deep-rooted Spiritual principle that underlies this passage. It is also, obviously, still in effect today; we know this because Jesus himself talked about it again and again. At the risk of simplifying this *too* much, let me put it up here in the most concise way I can think of:

** Obedience brings blessing.

For many people, (even Christian people) their 'default theology' is closer to the Old Covenant than the New Covenant. People still often think spiritually in terms of direct cause and effect. Signs of this are when we hear people dismayed over events that either happened to them (or, didn't happen to them) in this life. Eventually, as people expressing genuine grief, disappointment, anger, etc. (normal reactions) this thought comes out - "*This isn't fair! I've been good! I did everything I was supposed to do... and now, THIS?*" Where is God?

See, that's a bargaining theology, the belief that obedience is 'rewarded' in this life immediately, through measurable assets. If I'm 'good' then I'll be blessed materially, or in my relationships, etc. It's Old Covenant thinking. The thing is, Jesus never taught this! All the 'rewards' Jesus (and the NT) talked about are either spiritual blessings, or blessings we will enjoy in the next life... and if anything, as far as this life, Jesus warned us that following him was more likely to bring us persecution, trouble, and rejection than it would popularity and riches.

But, still, at the same time; Jesus constantly talked about a level of *spiritual blessing* that can **only** be reached through obedience. Do these passages sound familiar?

In John 14:15 Jesus says,

** "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Then he adds this promise, clearly linked to the 'obedience'.

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** "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever."

Then there is John 14: 23

** "Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

or this, John 15: 10

** If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

From these clear *teachings* of how obedience leads to the blessing of a deeper walk with God, a deeper knowledge of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; to the 'living examples' of his life among us - things like Jesus standing on the seashore and telling the the disciples, who had been fishing all night with no success to 'throw the net on the other side of the boat'; and when they did what he said, it resulted in such a catch that the nets began to rip - the inescapable conclusion is that this 'Spiritual Principle' is still in effect.

** *Obedience still brings blessing.* We've talked about this many times here. I've used examples of taking care of a Motorcycle engine the way the designer intended - if you follow the manual, use gas with the correct octane, get the thing serviced at certain intervals, it's going to work *the way it was intended!* Obedience = blessing. When we follow the design of the Grand Designer, life will be better for us.

Because we will walk with God. We will know his peace that passes understanding. We will learn to be content with what we have, being set free from the endless pursuit of stuff, recognition, affirmation, accolades. We'll know a deeper, more lasting source of Joy than we could ever find within the bounds of this world and all it has to offer.

It's interesting that back in Haggai, even with his Old Covenant theology, he hints of a coming time; a new, deeper, inward kind of blessing, that God will bring. He's talking about the Temple, again, and says that there's a reason God wants this place built. Not just for the obedience of

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these people, not just so that they can become grounded once again as a people who worship together (that's an important thing, but there was more!)

Look with me at Haggai 2 once again. This is the paragraph just before the one we read as I began this message:

** 6 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. 7 I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. 8 ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty. 9 ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. **‘And in this place I will grant peace,’** declares the Lord Almighty.”

** First, notice that in verse 7 we read a sentence that is rendered differently by many translations. That's because the Hebrew is difficult, at least partially because the subject and the verb do not agree in number! But, to completely ignore all the arguments either way, let me just say this: one way many people have seen this is as a personal reference. Not to the 'things nations desire' (i.e., their wealth, which would be used to rebuild the Temple), not 'what' but 'who' - The Desire of the Nations will come.

So, this is a Messianic reference. Next week is the first weekend of Advent, when we prepare for the coming of the Promised One. One of the great Advent hymns that we will certainly sing at some point is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". Verse 7 is a reference to this verse in Haggai:

** O come, Desire of nations bind
all peoples in one heart and mind.
From dust thou brought us forth to life;
deliver us from earthly strife.

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God says, rebuild this Temple, and I will come and fill it. Further, he says, in verse 9

** The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Lord Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Lord Almighty."

In this place... this is the very site (different Temple, but the same site) where Jesus would be presented as an infant, the place where old Simeon would bless and prophecy over him, the place of so much of his teaching, the place of his trial which led to his sacrificial death.

And God is promising here: build this Temple (obey me!) and I will bring you blessing. Not just you - but all people. The *priceless* blessing of peace that comes from not only knowing God, but from having God dwell in your very heart.

And so as the people gather around to begin anew the work on that Holy Place, it's no wonder that God chooses that moment to make this promise... (verse 19)

** From this day on I will bless you.

Can I say it again? **Obedience brings blessing.** Obedience brings us closer to God.

**Friends, that's why we are consecrating our Covenants today. That's why we've spent 7 week to prepare for this service. Because we want to be obedient. We want to be blessed, too. So, we're being bold enough to take God at his word, the same God who through the prophet Malachi invited us to "Test me in this... see if I don't throw open the windows of heaven and bless you." (Now, he was specifically talking about tithing there, but I think it equally can apply to any time we are willing to step out and step up in faith... and obey.

Test me... see what happens. This is not about trying to get God's attention - we're already loved far beyond our understanding! This isn't about earning ... anything... from God. God wants to

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bless us. But it's recognizing that the key to depth in our walk with God is our obedience. And these covenants are a way that we're saying... this is my plan of obedience in the coming year.

This is how I will put myself in a place to hear your voice; and I will surround myself with a community who will encourage me to run the race to the end.

I'm going to invite you to bring your Covenants forward as we sing these three closing choruses, Taizé style (i.e., repeatedly and prayerfully). If you would like to kneel and say a prayer as you leave your, feel free to do that. When we're done, we'll join in our Prayer of Consecration (which is in your bulletin).

Let's honor God together