

The Lord Who Stirs Hearts

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to our Bible readings for this morning. and Kerr is beginning a series through the book of Haggai. So do turn in your Bible.

We have visitor Bibles just at the side or the back. So do grab a Bible if you need to. Haggai chapter 1, page 791, if you're in the visitor Bible.

Just towards the end of the Old Testament, it comes between the two Z's, between Zephaniah and Zechariah. So do find Haggai.

And you might remember we were looking at Ezra and Nehemiah quite recently in our Sunday services. And Haggai comes in the midst of all that's going on there in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Let me just read to you a couple of verses from Ezra. So God's people had been in exile for many years and had returned with the purpose of rebuilding the temple.

[1 : 0 0] The temple had been destroyed. The Jerusalem was in ruins. But a remnant had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. And they'd made a good start. But things very quickly came to a halt.

Let me read to you from Ezra chapter 4. Don't turn there, but just listen to this. They've been busy rebuilding the temple. But then the people of the land, those Gentiles around them, discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build.

And they bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius, king of Persia. And it tells us that the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped.

And it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia. That building work stopped for 16 years. Then suddenly it restarted.

And chapter 5 of Ezra tells us that the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and in Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

[2 : 1 3] And then they began to rebuild the house. So what on earth did Haggai say to get the people of God building again? After 16 years of nothing, suddenly they're rebuilding again.

Well, let's read what happened. Let's read what Haggai said. Haggai chapter 1. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, the prophet, to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, the prophet.

Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways.

You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm.

[3 : 32] And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways.

Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it, and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little.

And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why, declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.

Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land, and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.

Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnants of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him.

[4 : 47] And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts their God, on the 24th day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

Amen. Well, amen. May God bless to us his word this morning. Well, a very good morning to you.

Please do turn in your Bibles back to Haggai, chapter 1, page 791, I believe, in the Church Bible. And as you turn there, let me wish you a Happy New Year.

[5 : 45] I wonder what will this year be all about? What will this year be all about for you? What will this year be all about for us together, as a church family?

Over the past week, there's been an avalanche of so-called New Year's messages, from presidents, and prime ministers, and first ministers, and counsellors, and anyone who thinks they're of any significance, whatsoever.

I suspect that the vast majority of us here have taken no notice. But what all these people are trying to do is to set out their priority for the year.

Set out what they are going to be all about in this coming year, in 2026. And so as we begin this new year together, as a church family, what better thing to do than to consider what we are going to be all about in this new year now begun?

What will we be all about in 2026? Well, the message of Haggai is that we are to be builders of God's kingdom. Over this week and next, God willing, we're going to be in this short book of Haggai, a prophet, come to speak God's message to God's people, to let our priorities together as a church be shaped and aligned by God's word.

[7 : 05] Because the world all around us wants to tell us that this new year is a chance to stop, to pause, to refocus all on ourselves, to prioritize our fitness, our education, our career, our personal goals, all good things.

But as Christians, as those who know what is ultimate, what is eternal, none of these things can ever be our ultimate priority. Let's just get our bearings.

God's people had been in exile. They'd been removed from God's land for their persistent disobedience and unbelief. God had said, had done what he'd said he would always do.

He'd given them over to their enemies. And the whole city of Jerusalem had been besieged and then conquered. God's people had been led away into Babylon, into exile, away from God.

But, with the victory of the Persian Empire came a decree that God's people were to return. They were to rebuild the house of God, the temple.

[8 : 18] I think very often we can fail to grasp just how serious it was for God's people to be without the temple. For the temple was the place where God dwelt.

It was where he could be worshipped. It was where sacrifice could be made. It was where sin could be dealt with. And so God's people being in exile, being away from the temple, it was no small thing.

No, it was going without the presence of God in the midst of his people. It was nothing like a church being without a church building. No, it was much, much bigger than that.

And so this return which was prophesied, it was a huge event for God's people. We've heard already in the book of Ezra, you can read the history of what happened. God's people, they go up from Babylon, they give generously all that's needed to build the temple.

They care greatly about worshipping God rightly, and they start rebuilding the temple which lay in ruins. But, then as we read, they stopped.

[9 : 25] Opposition against their leaders, opposition against all that they were doing grew stronger and stronger to the point that we read at the end of Ezra chapter 4, the people stopped building the temple.

their work, their great goal, the thing which they said and they believed was their ultimate priority, stopped. And it is at that point, Haggai chapter 1, verse 1, the second year of Darius the king, that Haggai comes and speaks to the people.

And so this prophecy, and indeed every single prophecy in the whole Bible doesn't come at a random time to random people. No, the words of Haggai come to a very specific people and they come to us today.

They take us from the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 520 BC to our present day and they take us to the future when God will return, when he will shake the whole earth and bring his new creation, his forever kingdom.

This morning, we'll take this chapter in three sections, seeing the twisted priorities of God's people than the reality of life without God's glory before finally seeing the restoring work of God's word.

[10 : 46] So firstly, looking at verses 1 to 6, we see the twisted priorities of God's people. God's people had physically returned to the land with the intention of rebuilding the temple.

It had looked so promising. They didn't grumble about the return, the dangerous journey, the desolate, the ruined city. And it really did look like things were going in the right direction.

But, because of the opposition, the people had stopped building. Verse 1, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai to use a ribble and Joshua, the high priest.

And the weight of this is repeated throughout the passage six times in this short chapter. We read, the word of the Lord came. This is not Haggai's word. No, this word comes from God with authority, with weight.

And the word begins, verse 2, by quoting what the people are saying or more likely thinking. The people say, verse 2, the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

[11 : 53] It's not the right time to be doing this, they say. Despite the command for them to go by the emperor, despite the provision of all the resources they needed, despite the prophecy of their return and rebuilding, despite it all, despite all God's kindness to them, they say it is not yet the right time to rebuild.

Not time to build, not time to see God dwell with them again. Now, the opposition they were facing was huge. We read about it in Ezra chapter 3, but their reaction to that opposition here reveals the spiritual state of their hearts.

And on a human level, it is quite understandable. So much seems to be going against them. The threats, the intimidation, it's considerable.

Perhaps, perhaps the people were right to wait, to hold off, to wait until the heat is out of the fire. It might be strategic, wise, prudent to do that.

Wait before continuing the building work. But, to think like that is to fail to recognize what the people were doing. Because the work which the people were doing was God's kingdom building work.

[13 : 18] For them, that meant building the temple, rebuilding the temple. Now, today, we do not have that same task, but we are a part of God making a dwelling for himself made of living stones, the church.

And we all, today, have a role to play in seeing God's kingdom built. With living stones, with men and women, with boys and girls. From teaching and training children in junior church, to encouraging your growth group as you meet to study God's word, to gathering together like this week by week, to sing God's praise together, to sit under his word together, to seeking to see God's kingdom grow by bringing a colleague to the life course, by bringing a friend to a service like this, to see more and more people join God's kingdom and for it to grow.

The attitude of the people in verse 2 is in some way like us saying, well, now is not the right time to be trying to see the church grow.

Things are difficult. The world doesn't seem to very much like the church. People are saying church leaders are rotten. The Bible, well, it's outdated. Perhaps.

Perhaps we need to hold off a little bit. We need to preserve what we have. We need to wait for a better time. Well, such thinking reveals the state of hearts before God and it means spiritual devastation.

[14 : 50] Notice how God introduces the people. He says, verse 2, these people say. The people, they're in broken relationship with God. He's no longer calling them my people as he's done since the days of the exodus from Egypt.

So that's the people's position. They say the time has not yet come to get on with the work of building God's kingdom. So what is it time for? Well, verses 3 and 4, God's word comes again.

It's not time to be building God's house, but it is the time for people to be building their own houses. Look, they're dwelling in paneled houses and that word paneled is used to describe the way that the first temple was finished.

And so in some way their houses are finished in a way that the temple ought to be. Now it was not that the people should have been without somewhere to live.

Not at all. God is not saying that. But the people had arrived back into a ruined city. Their first priority, the very reason for their return was supposed to be to see the temple rebuilt.

[16 : 03] But now, instead, we see that work stopped, and the people taken up with their own homes. The problem was never a lack of resources.

It was wrong priorities. The repeated use of you, you, yourself, highlights for us the people's preoccupation with their own comfort, their own ease, their own security.

Over and above seeing God's kingdom built. See, the problem doesn't appear to be a disbelief in God. These people, they believed enough to go back, to begin rebuilding.

The problem now is that God has been squeezed out as a priority in life. He's been pushed to the very margins. The people, instead, are putting their own comfort ahead of God's kingdom.

them. And as we together think about the kingdom building work which God has given us to do, as we consider what it is to be a part of the church, as we begin 2026 together, we do need to ask ourselves, what is it time for?

[17 : 15] It's never time to just take our foot off the gas and try and coast along in the Christian life, thinking we'll make it to church, we'll make it to the prayer meeting, as long as there's nothing else going on, as long as we don't get a better offer.

No, being the people of God, gathering together, and seeking to see that kingdom grow as more and more people join, ought to be our greatest longing. And so get priority in all of our life.

We can fool ourselves, we can even fool each other. There are some things, some priorities which we might think are more acceptable than others. Placing educational attainment above meeting with God's people twice on a Sunday.

Placing career advancement above serving God and actually being able to gather as his people. It's not wrong to do well in education, it's not wrong to do well in a career, those are good things.

But as we make decisions, as we prioritize what is really driving us, what do we want our lives to be all about? I have the great privilege of leading the student ministry in the church, and I've been so encouraged by some of those who are graduating at the end of this year.

[18 : 34] Because as they apply for things, as they weigh up opportunities, as they look for work, at the heart of those decisions is how they can continue to grow in kingdom building work, how they can continue to grow in service of God.

Thinking about an opportunity, not because of salary or status, but of how it will impact their service of God and his people, how it will impact the church.

See, the temple in Haggai chapter 1 lay in ruins in the midst of the people, like a dead body in their midst, but rather than deal with it, rather than prioritizing what ought to have been the greatest problem, the people sought comfort elsewhere.

And we do need to be constantly asking ourselves and asking each other about our priorities. As a church, together, we can spur each other on to prioritize building God's kingdom above all else.

For, and we'll see more of this next week, God's kingdom, his people dwelling with him together, is the most glorious thing in the world. world. And it is the only thing that will last forever.

[19 : 55] But that is a real challenge. Like in Haggai's Day, there are opponents to the work. There are also very real temptations to do what the people here did. To say, now is not the time for this or for that.

It's not the right time to think about our next evangelistic course. It's not the right time to think about partnerships beyond our own walls. It is always, always the right time to be thinking about seeing God's kingdom grow.

Yes, we need to do that wisely and strategically, not recklessly. But it is a great joy, isn't it, to be surrounded by people in our church family whose whole lives are shaped by that.

Shaped by the priorities of God's kingdom for themselves, for calendars, for family, for work. It's a tremendous encouragement to see that in those around us and to be growing together to do that more and more.

But with the last couple of verses of this section, verses 5 and 6, God helps his people and he helps us to see reality. The Lord tells the people to consider their ways. That means literally set your heart upon your ways, reflect seriously on life.

[21 : 11] And the start of a new year is an opportunity to do that, to realign our priorities, to pause, and to ask ourselves, what is it time for?

What is it time for in our service of God and of his people, the church? And actually that's what should be happening every single time we gather around God's word together.

Letting God's word shape and align our priorities to bring them back in line with his own. Look at verse 6, they sow much, they harvest little.

The language of these verses takes us back to the covenant, to God's pledge of relationship with his people. And God had warned exactly what would happen if the people failed to live in right relationship with him.

And that's exactly what's now happening. Haggai, like every prophet, he comes as a covenant enforcer, not bringing a new word, but a call for faithfulness to the covenant, to the relationship which God made with his people.

[22 : 21] And so we've seen the twisted priorities of God's people, but what we see next in verses 7 to 11 is more of what Haggai has begun to unpack. We see the reality of life without God's glory.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, verse 7, consider your ways. Haggai is not only calling them just to contemplate their position, no, he's telling them to get on with responding in practice.

God speaks telling the people to go, get wood, gather it, rebuild, so that I can be glorified, says the Lord. It's one thing to think about our priorities, isn't it?

One thing to think about them, to consider them, but that's not enough. It's like the New Year's resolution, the gym membership, which is bought online with no time in the calendar to actually go during the week, no concrete action to make it a reality.

One writer on these verses says, action without reflection is usually unwise, but reflection without action is sterile.

[23 : 32] Haggai wants to see evidence that the word of the Lord is at work in the people's lives. You see, the considering of their ways, which the people were to do, was always to result in action.

And that can be a warning for us. It can be very easy to think, to consider, to ponder, but that thinking, the transforming of our minds which God is working, must also then, be put into practice.

It's easy, very easy, to put things off forever and ever, rather than getting on with a change that we know must be made. And as if they've forgotten, Haggai makes the point again, showing the people the reality of their situation.

Verse 9, you looked for much. You had big ideas, big dreams, and yet it came to little. people. Your harvest blew away in the wind.

And why? Why has this happened? Well, it's happened because of the people's wrong priorities. This is the reality of life without God's glory in the midst of his people.

[24 : 51] Notice that God has done this. The language of I have is throughout these verses. God is acting apart from his people. And why has he done this?

Verse 9, because God's house lies in ruins. While each person is busy with their own house, God has called a drought on the land. He's called the harvest to be unfruitful.

The people's neglect of God has led to this situation. And perhaps as you plan for the year ahead, as the family planner comes down from the side of the fridge, we can all ask ourselves, what are we busy with?

What are we taken up with? What's filling our time? The people, they've failed to honor God and so they're bearing the consequences of that in line with the covenant, in line with the relationship which God made with his people.

It was the very heavens and earth which witnessed that covenant being made. And now they're involved in showing God's displeasure with his people. These are covenant curses.

[26 : 01] They don't come out of nowhere. Drought and famine and unfruitfulness. These curses, they come from Deuteronomy 28 where Moses says, the Lord will send on you curses, confusion and frustration in all that you undertake to do because you have forsaken me.

Do you see, neglecting the Lord's work is neglecting the Lord. And that is the way of frustration in life.

It leaves us unable to enjoy the life of faith. And it is very easy for us today to doubt that, to not believe that. It's very easy day to day, week by week, to believe that prioritizing other things will lead to fruit, lead to enjoyment in life.

But God has not wired the world that way. It will only end in frustration. And I think we know this to be true in our own midst.

Just think of perhaps some of the more senior saints amongst us. Those who are the most cheerful, the most satisfied in life. Their life is not marked by those things.

[27 : 21] No, their life is marked by faithful service of God and of his people and delighting in that. Not the frustration pictured here as God's people are under his judgment.

The wrong priorities of the people in Haggai 1 meant they lived without God dwelling in their midst. And that ultimately is a picture of life without God.

They had luxury, they had paneled, they had finished houses. It might have had a veneer of attraction. It's like a perfect looking apple, but you take a bite and the inside is rotten.

No, these covenant curses, they were promised and they were delivered always with the intention of seeing God's people return, return to him. Haggai came as a covenant enforcer to bring God's word to his people, to help them see reality, to see the curses and so turn back to God so that he might once again dwell with them.

And so the question is, what will the people do? What will the response be to the word of God coming? Well, let's look now at the end of the chapter, verses 12 to 15, where we see the restoring work of God's word.

[28 : 46] in response to God's word, in response to all they've heard, what will the people do? Well, the leaders who Haggai addressed directly in verse 1, along with all the people, verse 12, they obey the voice of the Lord.

It's an amazing turnaround. Look at the end of verse 12, the people feared the Lord. It was fear of their enemies which had caused them to stop building.

But now the word of God has come. It has restored them. It has caused them to fear God rather than man. The people have once again become the Lord's people.

Haggai is a rare but instantly successful prophet. The people, they obey the Lord, their God. And the Lord pledges that he will be with his people, verse 13.

This is relationship renewal, covenant renewal, God pledging again to be with his people. And so the Lord, verse 14, stirs up their hearts to come together and to build the temple.

[30 : 03] Now the dating of these verses reminds us that a king who is opposed to their work is still on the throne. Despite that, they build, learning to live by faith, not fear, trusting in God's word.

It is the restoring work of God's word which has transformed the situation of the people, causing them to return to the Lord, to build for his kingdom.

Notice verse 14, what has happened, the Lord stirred their hearts. That's a constant word used to describe God's actions through this time. And it remains a work of God today.

God stirs the hearts of his people by his word to labor for his kingdom. And what an amazing thing to think it is as we gather week by week, as we sing God's praise, as we sit under his word, God is at work to stir our hearts, to restore us by his word.

I think that changes how we come to church, doesn't it? We gather expectantly, trusting and praying for the transformation that he can bring in our hearts.

[31 : 21] He stirs our hearts, and we do need his stirring, and we need the restoring work of his word. Because on our own, on my own, we would seek comfort, we would seek security, we would seek ease for ourselves.

But we know that only God's word can bring transformation, that only it can transform our priorities for ourselves, for our families, for our church together. And perhaps here at the start of a new year, you think things are a little out of kilter in one way or another.

If that's the case, then in grace, return to the Lord, for he loves to bless his people whose hearts have been stirred by his word. Just look at what happens here as God's covenant relationship with his people is restored.

God says he is with his people. We've just celebrated the birth of the Lord Jesus at Christmas. And so we, today, we don't return to the Lord by building a temple or going to a temple.

We come to the new temple. We come to Christ himself. God says to God's God's kingdom. We see the glory of God's kingdom.

[32 : 42] And we know what it is to live in right relationship with God, not by looking at a building made of stone, but looking around at the church which God is building with living stones.

And that really can thrill our hearts as we begin this new year together. together. It really can make us never want to squeeze God out to the very margins of life, letting the good things that we have threaten to take priority.

No, instead, as together, as God's people, we obey his word, as we hear his stirring of our hearts through it, then we know together that we have the very great blessing of being in God's kingdom-building work.

And we can go about all he's given us to do with joy. And we do need constant reminders and constant encouragements to do that.

We need each other. And ultimately we need the Lord to stir our hearts like he does here. And we can pray for that together, that the Lord would stir our hearts by his word to labor for his kingdom.

[34 : 03] Let's pray together. Father God, your kingdom is everlasting.

And so we pray that you would lift our eyes to see you, the king, and so hear the call to live and to labor, to point each other, to point our whole city, our nation, indeed the whole world, to the glory and the security which is found only in you.

Would you continually stir our hearts to that end? For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.