

Seek First the Kingdom of God

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[0 : 00] Well, take your Bibles and turn with me, if you would, to the prophet Haggai. You can't find Haggai, fear not. It's page 791 if you have a church Bible.

If you have your own Bible, you're on your own. But it's near the end of the Old Testament. One of those chaps that just hides in there among those people we call the minor prophets. But not a minor message, a very important message.

In his two brief chapters. And Josh Johnson is going to be leading us through these in the next two or three Sunday evenings.

And tonight we're going to read the whole of the first chapter, Haggai chapter 1. Haggai chapter 1 then at verse 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 that the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. And the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet.

[1 : 19] It is time. 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, but 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.

And he who earns wages does so to put them in 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 look for much, and behold, it came to little. 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, on the new wine, the oil, and what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.

[2 : 42] Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant 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 them.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, 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 6th month, in the 2nd year of Darius the king.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Do please turn again in your Bibles to Haggai chapter 1.

- [3 : 53] Imagine a young child being told over and over again not to play with fire. After various close calls, eventually the child gets badly burnt.
- Now you'd expect upon returning from the hospital that the child would have learnt its very painful lesson. So what would you be left thinking if once again the child was to do the same thing all over again?
- Or a prisoner released early from a life sentence only to quickly commit the same crime all over again? I'm sure we could think of lots of similar instances of such things.
- And that's the sort of thing we find in Haggai. Because of the exile, the high point of Israel's history is well and truly consigned to the past, even though a restoration of sorts has begun.
- Haggai's day is the day of small things, small recoveries of some of what they once had. But there's a danger that it could all unravel yet again.
- [4 : 59] Israel were repeating those same terrible mistakes of yesteryear. How did it get to this? Well, the story of the Bible is the story of the progress of the kingdom of God.
- Right from the beginning, in the garden, man was to fill the earth and subdue it, to extend the perfection of the garden to the ends of the earth, so that the whole earth might be full of the glory of God, and that he might dwell in it.
- And after the fall, God moved to achieve this through his various covenants, by promising to make Israel into a great people that would have their own promised place. And he promised his presence to be with them as they set about their purpose of blessing the world and extending his kingdom.
- And he promised to establish a line of kings from David's line that would reign forever. God kept these promises as they reached a high point under Solomon, when finally the temple was built and God no longer dwelt with him, only in a tent.
- But it all went horribly wrong. Israel were continually unfaithful to God and his covenant, and so God brought an exile to them.
- [6 : 14] The kingdom was broken up, the temple was dismantled, the people were taken captive, and the throne of David lay empty. Far from God's kingdom extending to the ends of the earth, it almost reached the point of extinction.
- But some 20 years before Haggai was prophesying, there was a change in world superpower, and so there was a change in foreign policy.
- We can read about that at the start of Ezra. And miraculously, the king of Persia, Cyrus, issues an edict so that the Israelites could return to the land, so they could rebuild the temple. But 20 years on, by the time we reach Haggai, work has long stopped.
- The work of building the temple had faced opposition and discouragement at every turn, and work has stopped. The great hope of the return, initiating the restoration of God's kingdom, ends up looking deeply and tragically disappointing.
- No king, no temple. They're in the land, but it's a shadow of what had gone before. That's the setting into which God raised Haggai.
- [7 : 29] Restoration has begun, but it's in danger of faltering all over again. God's kingdom is on the brink once again, and it's been 60 years since God has spoken to his people.
- But God has not given up on his kingdom, and he never will. That's what we see in verse 1, because his word comes to his prophet. And whilst God speaks, there is still hope.
- This is another step on the way to restoration. And so there are two parts to Haggai's opening word in this chapter 1. We see in verses 1 to 11, faithlessness and its frustration.
- And then in verses 12 to 15, repentance and its restoration. So first, verses 1 to 11, faithlessness and its frustration.

Commitment to God, his kingdom, and its growth in this world is always to be a priority for God's people. When it isn't, we're rejecting God.

[8 : 36] Having returned to the promised land, the remnant of Israel have become complacent. Verse 2, they are saying that the time is not right to rebuild the temple.

But God disagrees. In response to what the people are saying, God speaks through his prophet to say, verse 4, if it isn't a time for the temple to be rebuilt, then is it a time for you to dwell in your well-built houses?

Notice that their houses are described as paneled houses. That's a reference to what the roof of the temple would have looked like. It's often described in similar ways.

The point is, they're not lacking in what's needed to build it. That's not the problem. Instead, God is saying, these people care much more for their own houses than mine.

This has nothing to do with it being the wrong time. They've been able to finish their own houses to make their own suitable to live in. But all the while, God says, verse 4, my house lies in ruins.

[9 : 45] And because of the people's ambivalence, their lethargy, look at how God addresses them in verse 2. These people. God doesn't call them his people, but just these people.

They've been faithless all over again to God. The exile happened because Israel chose to ignore God, to rebel against him. Israel failed to give God his due place.

And what followed was an almighty flattening of the whole kingdom of Israel, so that almost nothing was left. No temple, no king, and the people were carted off by the ruling superpower.

But now, having returned from exile, Israel seemed to be making the same mistakes, just like the child going back to the fire. And when the exile did happen, because of Israel's unfaithfulness, it was a real threat to the existence of the kingdom of God.

All that the kingdom meant for Israel was ripped away from them. And now that there was a glimmer of restoration, when Darius, the new Persian king, allowed them to build the temple and occupy the land, they're making excuses.

[11 : 03] Now is not the time. First, we need to earn enough money before we can commit to God and his kingdom. First, we need to get our kids through their education at Jerusalem College. First, we need to fill in the blank.

For now, we need to take care of our own things before we can look to God's priorities. Israel would rather look after their own houses than enjoy the prospect of true restoration as the Lord's people, with him in their midst.

For their faithlessness, Haggai has a further message for Israel. He says, the frustration that you knew is God's curses on you. That's what he's saying in verses 5 to 11.

Look at verse 6. They've been busying themselves with their own priorities, work, food, drink, clothes, and money. But in each of these things, there is only frustration.

Despite sowing much, they harvest little. They eat and drink, but they're never full. They wear clothes, but they're never warm. And in the end, all that they earn is poured into a bag with holes.

[12 : 19] Frustration. They have busied themselves with their own priorities. Yes, they're the basic necessities of life. We all need to eat and earn money and include ourselves.

Of course we do. But our most fundamental need above all of these things, even food and money, is our standing with God.

Without him, in the end, all will be left with is frustration and futility. Verse 9. They looked for much, but it came to little.

And then Haggai says that God is the one behind their frustration. What they brought whom, God blew away. All this, again, because his house lies in ruins.

Verse 10. The heavens withhold their dew and the earth, it's produce at God's hand.

Verse 11. God has called for a drought on everything around them. Haggai is spelling out that Israel are under the curses of the covenant.

[13 : 24] They've forsaken God all over again, neglecting his temple, is neglecting his kingdom and God himself. So God has brought these circumstances on this people, just as he said he would do in Deuteronomy 28.

Listen to some of the curses from that chapter. The Lord will send on you curses, confusion, and frustration in all that you undertake to do. You shall carry much seed into the field and you shall gather little.

You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes. Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you in hunger and thirst and nakedness and lacking everything.

Haggai is spelling out for their returnees that they're living under the curses because they failed to listen to God once again. They've neglected his temple and so they've broken covenant with God.

But Haggai offers them a way forward, a way to avoid the repeat of this exile. Verse 8, he says, Go, gather things to build God's house that he may take pleasure in it and be glorified.

[14 : 50] He says, Build the temple that you might worship God and bring glory to him. Build the temple so that you can once again experience God's presence with you.

Build the temple so that you can, build the temple so that God's kingdom may once again stand as God's people are in his promised place enjoying his presence.

I will draw together some implications of all this towards the end. But for now, we mustn't take this as a formula that tells us that if things are not going well for us materially, we need to serve God more.

Or, on the flip side, that by investing in God's work, we will enjoy material blessing. That's not Haggai's point here. Rather, what this passage tells us is that if we completely disregard God, then we will, in the end, fall foul of the ultimate covenant curses.

At the last day, we will experience the full weight of God's just wrath. The curses we find meted out here point only to greater curses at the last day.

[16 : 03] But as it is, the warning around these curses serve to help the Israelites repent. And that's what we see in verses 12 to 15. Repentance and its restoration.

When God's people commit or recommit to him and the growth of his kingdom, then his blessings are present with them none more so than his presence.

It's always a gracious thing on the part of the Lord to speak to his people even if it's a warning. For it gives his people the opportunity to heed it and to turn again to God.

The way forward has been spilt out. God has said, build the temple. Get back to work. For not doing it, Israel have experienced the curses.

But staggeringly, Haggai is listened to instantly. Amongst most of the prophets, when they speak, Israel didn't listen.

[17 : 06] But here the people hear God's words, they're confronted by it, and they respond with real action. Their repentance is total. Look at verse 12.

It is all Israel from Zerubbabel, the descendant of David, through Joshua, the high priest, to all the remnant. All of their attorneys obeyed God's voice through the words of the prophets.

What a demonstration of the power of God's word. Instantly, a whole people drop their self-interests and turn to serve the living God.

As an aside, if there is ever a hope for Scotland, for Britain, it is the voice of God, spoken through the prophets and apostles, faithfully preached today.

That's what brought about this real repentance. And in this repentance, we see a good picture of what that means. We see hearing God's word that exposes how we're scorning him and not just apologizing for it, but obeying.

[18 : 16] A complete change of direction. That's what repentance means. No longer self-interested here, but doing what God wants his people to prioritize. And with this repentance comes restoration.

Look at verse 13. God's response is to declare, I am with you. In verse 2, Israel were described as these people.

However, now, post-repentance, God says, I am with you. You are my people. I will be with you. I will be your God. God, only four words, but these are the words of covenant renewal.

As God promised to be Abraham's God, as God spoke to Israel at Sinai and said they would be his treasured possession, that God would be with them all the way. So now, he says, I am with you.

Throughout all of this, the covenant was at stake. Israel had again and again been faithless. and for it, they endured exile, cut off from the blessing of God, removed from his land, removed from his presence.

[19 : 30] They hadn't just stumbled a few times. They'd continually ignored God. They'd continually broken his law despite his prophets calling for repentance and telling them to turn again to God.

But they didn't. Their attorneys were now facing the prospect of reliving the whole thing. Here they are again under the curses and failure to listen would inevitably end in another exile.

This is what Palmer Robertson says. A restored people cannot assume that they will forever occupy the place of God's blessing. Continuation in unrepentant sin will eventuate in a repetition of the awesome judgment of the exile that they've already experienced.

and from this there could be no expectation of return. But because they have repented, their previous experience of exile has not been in vain.

Failure to take God seriously through prioritizing his temple is a grievous thing. But God in his grace offers the chance to turn again to him and he promises to be with his people.

[20 : 50] That's what the temple was for. It was where Israel's sin could be dealt with and where God could be present with them. And so graciously because of their repentance he again says I am with you.

Now fast forward to 21st century Glasgow and we live in an altogether different time.

But nonetheless there are real implications of this for us now. Here are two brief ones here are two a brief one and a longer one. First we now have the greater renewed temple.

In chapter 2 Haggai speaks of the greater glory of this latter temple. In this era of small things in which these people were living it wouldn't have looked like that was possible.

Even when this temple was complete it was no match for Solomon's original temple. But we now know that the truly glorious temple is the Lord Jesus himself.

[21 : 58] He said of himself I tell you something greater than the temple is here. When he spoke of the destruction of the temple he said but it will be raised up again in three days.

The truer greater renewed temple of God is the Lord Jesus. And so for us the temple of God where we can have our sin dealt with is Jesus.

The temple of God where we can enjoy God's presence where we can commune with God is Jesus. and so how much more do we have the hope of ultimate restoration?

How much more do we have the hope of God's kingdom spreading throughout the whole world? And so how much more ought we to seek first God's kingdom not our own interests?

How much more ought we to prioritize God's purposes? And that leads us on to our second implication.

[23 : 05] We are still to devote ourselves to building the temple and the kingdom. We do truly have a better experience of the kingdom of God and of the temple but the priorities the responsibilities of God's people don't change.

Faithfulness to God is still prioritizing the building of God's temple but what that looks like for us is not gathering wood but rather building with living stones.

To take Haggai seriously now isn't to start a new building project to redecorate our building or to build a new one. This isn't about bricks and mortar anymore. Jesus is the renewed temple and as Christians we are joined to him.

the church is joined to him and becomes part of his body and we now build with people and we don't build a building.

Building the temple for us is building the church of which Christ is the head of its body. It is building the church with living stones of which Christ is the corner stone.

[24 : 21] as a church our mission is to reach out build up and send out. That is temple building.

If like the remnant we are preoccupied with self-interest if we're busy only with building our own houses with raising our own families with only our own work and food and money and clothes then we need to think very carefully.

That would be to make the same mistake as Israel. A restored people cannot assume that they will forever occupy the place of God's blessing.

We can't presume upon grace whilst putting our fingers in our ears about God's priorities. Continuing to ignore God's priorities leaves us in a very dangerous place.

We still face the same word today. Whilst you dwell and build your lovely homes, my church lies in ruins.

[25 : 34] Or whilst we're busy with work, education, family, hobbies, my church lies in ruins. The church in Scotland lies in ruins.

The need for building the church is great and urgent. We can't afford to let that slip as a priority. If playing our part only happens when it fits our schedule, then Haggai is urging us to rethink.

There'll be many of us who are told by caring family members or friends that we do too much at church and we need to focus more on ourselves. If that's you, be encouraged that being busy with God's priorities is enjoying life in real relationship with God and his presence is promised to you.

Or maybe some of us have parents or are parents that want their kids to concentrate on getting their lives in place. Good education, good job, good spouse, good home, good kids, healthy savings account, good holidays every year.

And the thought of them giving themselves in service to church as a priority over and above that causes real friction. Maybe when a parent hears that their child wants to give lots of their first paycheck to God's work, they urge their children to reconsider.

- [27 : 13] Don't worry, there'll be time for that in the future. Now's not the time for that. Now's the time to get your house in order. Or how would you respond if you're taken out for coffee and someone encourages you to think maybe about doing a ministry apprenticeship?
- will your decision either way be driven by God's priorities? By temple building priorities? Or will it be more to do with wanting to build your own panelled house, whatever that looks like for you?

Or perhaps you've been coming to church for a while, you've committed to being here and suddenly someone asked you to begin serving in a particular area. The opportunity to play a part in encouraging others, in introducing some people to Jesus is there for you to take.

But at the prospect of giving up a Friday night, at the prospect of losing your own time, putting resources into it, means that you have to think about it and say it's just not a great time for me at the moment.

Haggai is telling us that building the church must be a priority. It can't just be when it suits us.

- [28 : 34] It can't just be when we've reached the pinnacle of our career, when we've finally acquired our model home, or wardrobe, or lifestyle, or whatever it is. It can't be that after all of those, we decide, now I've got some time to invest in church.

And of course, with all these things, we need to avoid being foolish. There are real considerations to make, but in thinking them through, we must be aware of saying the equivalent of the time isn't right to rebuild the house.

Is it a time for us to dwell in panelled houses whilst the church lies in ruins? well, as we are serving faithfully week after week, as we are continually trying to bring our friends to church and introduce them to Jesus, as we do prioritise our family life around church, then be encouraged.

Because those who gladly and freely give themselves to serving in this way, to building the church, to sacrificing and being part of the ministry, God says to you, I am with you.

In the face of sacrificing things we've dreamt of, and when we feel the cost of it, God still promises to be with us.

- [30 : 08] And we need to be assured of that. Because the situation that they were in, isn't too dissimilar to ours. Even though we have a greater experience of all that God has promised, it can still feel like we are in a day of little things.

Christian values and beliefs are now in the vast minority. It can feel like in all our efforts to evangelism that no one will ever come to faith.

The world around us just seems a bit too hostile. It can feel like we're only going to find things increasingly difficult if we're living for God in Scotland.

But as we invest in our work now, we are looking ahead to the day when the temple of God will fill the whole earth, where the whole world will be the dwelling place of God and his people.

And we can look forward to that day when God says, I am with you is revealed. We can look forward to that day when the I am with you that God says will be revealed to us in full sight, in vivid, high definition.

- [31 : 27] We will be present physically with him in his renewed earth that is his temple. temple. And so nothing for us as a church can supersede our priority of working towards that.

Haggai's message for us is seek first the kingdom. Seek first the kingdom. Don't be complacent like Israel. temple. For if we do what God has commanded, if we build his temple, then all of his covenant blessings are promised to us.

And the crown jewel of those is God's presence with us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that we have the assurance of your presence with us through Jesus, the truer, greater temple.

Give us a vision of the great day when your temple will fill the whole earth so that we would be spurred on as a church to give ourselves to building your church and extending your kingdom to the whole earth.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.