

# Seeing through the Fog

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn to our Bibles and we're going to read together from the prophet Haggai who hides himself just before Zechariah and just after Zephaniah but it's page 791 if you have one of our Blue Vistas Bibles. Josh began a study in this prophet last week. We looked at chapter 1 and this evening we're going to read in chapter 2 just the first nine verses the next installment. So the people of God have returned from exile, began rebuilding the temple, stopped, fell into sloth. God's word came, stirred them up again and got them going and here we are in chapter 2 verse 1. In the seventh month on the 21st day of the month the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest and to all the remnant of the people and say who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.

My spirit remains in your midst, fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts, yet once more in a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.

And I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all nations shall come in. And I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts.

The silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.

[ 2 : 24 ] Amen. May God bless to us his word. Please do turn again in your Bibles to Haggai chapter 2.

We live in a world that seems to be obsessed with keeping up appearances.

Social media is littered with photos celebrating how wonderful other people's lives are. And they seem to whisper to us quietly, look at how fantastic my home is. Look at how fantastic our pet is. Have you seen the amazing breakfast that landed on my lap this Saturday? Or it's littered with posts saying, look at my first class honors degree. Have you heard about my amazing new job? And for most of us it can leave us feeling rather disappointed. We see glimpses and pictures of what this world can offer, of what it's possible to have and to do and to achieve.

[ 3 : 25 ] And then we look around at our reality and it's rather more mundane. Or worse, it's hard work, it's difficult and it's trying. The pictures we see of the world around are bright sunny skies, photographs with children, even pets smiling away.

And what we know is grey skies and sleepless nights with screaming children. Maybe you want to catch up with how some of your old classmates are doing.

And when you look up what they're doing and what they're up to, they only seem to be experiencing success, flourishing. Or maybe you've got friends who go to another church and theirs seems that much more tempting.

They can tell you of grand spiritual experiences that are happening. And all you hear are churches that seem characterized by excitement. And you look around and think, gosh, what we have here is only hard work.

It's slow. Whatever fruit there's been has been hard earned. Well, that's the kind of experience that Haggai is speaking to in this passage. Only Israel weren't looking around themselves, but back in time, longing for the good old days.

[ 4 : 41 ] We'll look at this passage in three parts. First, we see the problem, verses 1 to 3, which is that progress is faltering. Progress is faltering.

Then, secondly, we'll look at God's persistent faithfulness in verses 4 to 5. And third, God's promised future in verses 6 to 9. A problem and two encouragements.

So first, we see that progress is faltering, verses 1 to 3. In the midst of faithfully serving God and his gospel, it is not unique to experience discouragement when you look at the state of the world and even the church.

That was certainly the experience that the remnant had here. And many of us will know a feeling that's something similar. Look at verse 3. God's word through his prophet asks three questions. Question 1. Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? Now, there have been some who are still alive. There would have been some who are still alive that had been around before the exile and the destruction of the temple.

[ 5 : 50 ] That would have been about 66 years earlier. And no doubt those who had been around then would know of the grandeur of Solomon's temple that was at the heart of the life of a flourishing and glorious kingdom.

Question 2. How do you see it now? Notice this isn't a new temple they're building, but they're restoring the old one.

And the truth is that they wouldn't have seen it as glorious at all. So question 3. Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

The implied answer is, of course, yes. It is like nothing. It is underwhelming, discouraging even. Progress is slow. The feeling must surely have been that the temple was never going to be as glorious as it once was.

In these verses, God is speaking to acknowledge the feeling amongst his people. He sees what is going on. And the feeling would have been made even more tangible by the time of year that it was.

[ 6 : 58 ] The date in verse 1 is not just an incidental detail. It isn't just to let us know that a month has passed since last week's events. This prophecy is spoken on the 21st day of the 7th month, which is the time of the climax of the festival of booths or tabernacles.

We can read about that in Leviticus 23. It was a festival that lasted seven days and meant that Israel stayed in tents for that time. It was a celebration to mark God's bringing Israel out of Egypt and anticipating the promised land.

A time where God proved his incredible faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. It was a time when Israel could look forward to the promised land, where they could look forward to God keeping his promises.

They had the anticipation of the grand kingdom of Israel. But now that kingdom is behind them. The exile has dismantled it.

They celebrate this festival. But everything's fallen apart since then. Haggai's day felt more like a day of rubble and hardship than a day of rescue and hope.

[ 8 : 09 ] The date is important too because it was at the same time of year that Solomon's temple was dedicated. When it was first dedicated, it was at this same festival.

And by now, Israel have begun to do the work God commanded in chapter 1, as we saw last week. But it just didn't seem like it was going to achieve anything. It seemed like it was only going to be disappointment compared to the temple of days gone by.

They're reminded of this all the more painfully as they celebrate this festival. Was this restoration really going to achieve anything? Even when the temple would be completed, setting aside that it wouldn't be as grand as before, it also wouldn't even hold the same significance.

Under Solomon, it was the heart of life under a thriving king and kingdom. But now, it could just be a bit of politicking by the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius.

Let it be built to keep relations good. It certainly wasn't going to be the hub of activity that it was before, the great symbol of God's blessing on a great nation. Now, it reduced to the status of incidental in another superpower scheme of things.

[ 9 : 25 ] And of course, since the days of Solomon, there hasn't just been its physical destruction, but also as Ezekiel depicts it, God's glory had departed the temple.

Verse 3, Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? Well, that glory is gone. That's the experience of life in the supposedly restored Israel.

Do we know that feeling? Long gone are the days of great rallies where on a Saturday night, churches would be packed out with preachers inviting hundreds to respond to the call of the gospel. Long gone are the days of Billy Graham filling stadiums with thousands responding to the gospel. Perhaps we look back at student days and yearn for the excitement of being part of a CU surrounded by Christians, easy opportunities for evangelism, where now it's a hard slog. Work life is busy. It's a struggle to get to the prayer meeting. It's a struggle to manage what we're doing amongst the various responsibilities at work and at home, never mind at church.

[ 10 : 35 ] And now, too, Christendom is long gone. Reports are everywhere of the church in the West in decline, where once the church had a voice in society and even an important one.

Now it seems like we're the crazies who haven't progressed like the civilized. Keep them quiet. Keep them out of sight. And all the while, our views are ousted and laws are introduced that would almost make us feel sick.

Maybe you've been persistently doing what you can to proclaim Jesus to colleagues, neighbors, and friends, but it just doesn't seem to work. You may ask yourself, is relying on the Bible really going to be the way to impact this world?

Does this world even take the church seriously? After all, we live in a world that wants instant results. We love faster and faster internet. We're tempted to upgrade phones, computers, devices, all for the sake of a few seconds of quicker access.

We even have instant news now, where news outlets can't keep up with Twitter. And so it can feel like the plodding, faithful Christian life that perseveres when life is really hard, that keeps doing the basics of investing in the gospel, investing it in people's lives.

[ 11 : 59 ] It just seems disappointing or slow. It just seems like it can't really be worth it. Well, God's word to his people here is not to sharply rebuke, but it's to strongly reassure.

He understands that we can feel like this as all around, all we can see is rubble. Where we look around at our Christian life, at our church, and at the ministries we're involved in, and all we can see is a temple in ruins.

God has spoken to bring us encouragement. And so we see his response in the rest of the passage in these two encouragements. First, verses four to five tell us of God's persistent faithfulness. faithfulness. God's persistent faithfulness. When we are discouraged, we must look back and remember what God has done in rescuing his people and how he has dwelt with them just as he promised.

This message to the people doesn't reject how they're feeling. It doesn't downplay the hard realities that were being faced. The temple is in ruins. It's not like the past for all sorts of reasons.

[ 13 : 11 ] There's lots of work to do. These concerns aren't brushed off. But what Haggai brings to the people is God's reassurance. He says, verse four, be strong.

Be strong. Be strong. And then he says, work. Keep going. Keep doing it, even though it looks hard, even though it looks fruitless, for I am with you.

God doesn't say, forget about the task. But he says, whilst you work, I am with you. God's presence, just like last week, is what is most important.

So whilst there is work to do, whilst they are faithfully getting on with the work that God has given them, God says he's going to be with them. His presence is amongst them.

Just as he, verse five, had promised, covenanted to do. Israel hit their nadir in the exile.

[ 14 : 17 ] God's presence had left his temple. He'd ceased to speak to his people. But God is reassuring this fragile remnant that he is faithful to his covenant.

He always has been and he always will be. And so as they faithfully undertake God's work, he is with them just as he was with Joshua at the days of the conquest.

Notice the repeat of those familiar words in verse four. Familiar from Joshua chapter one. Be strong. Be strong. And the message is the same to this generation.

Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Joshua the high priest. Be strong, all the people. Just as God's promised, just as God promised his presence to the Israelites as he said about taking the promised land, so God is with this restoration community who are retaking it.

And verse five, just as God had promised his presence with his people at Sinai to Moses, so too can the remnant be assured of it here.

[ 15 : 28 ] The greatest tragedy for Israel would be God removing himself from them. This is what Moses says in Exodus 33.

If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people?

Is it not in your going with us that we are distinct, I and your people? from every other people on the face of the earth? Is it not God's presence with his people that makes them special?

But here God is assuring his people that in the restoration they do have his presence. He hasn't abandoned them. Things might look bleak, they might look like they're feeling, but God is present with his people and he's committed to fulfilling his promises.

The temple mightn't be completed, but he is with them in their midst. So he says, work, fear not, even if the surrounding nations linger to thwart you.

[ 16 : 43 ] Fear not. God says, do what you can do. When rubble is all that you can see, keep working. But know that as you do, I work through you.

God is saying, I am actively fulfilling my purposes. And so every day that we keep pressing on in faithfulness to God, even when it seems fruitless, that is a testimony to God's word being at work in us.

And as we keep doing it, we have the knowledge that we share the same promises, the same heritage that spans all the way back to the Exodus and that remarkable rescue through the conquest where they finally got the land and beyond even this restoration, we can be more sure of God's faithfulness.

We can be more sure of his commitment to his covenant. The assurance of God's presence with them is the assurance that they are part of his covenant family.

And as he has acted in history already to redeem his people and to build his kingdom, he will surely continue to do so. So they and we might not have a Solomon or a Moses or even a physical temple, but God has promised his presence to them and to us.

[ 18 : 21 ] And that is the greatest blessing there is in belonging to God. Now, of course, we want to be temple builders. We want to be engaged in the extension of God's kingdom to the world.

And our part in that doesn't look particularly spectacular. We as a church commit together to telling of the victory that Christ has won. And it is God who ultimately builds his kingdom.

God's kingdom. But the unspectacular looking work is transformed to be world-changing as God's spirit causes it to bear fruit, as he's present amongst it.

That's what turns it into something special. Work, because the work isn't futile. It has God's stamp all over it.

whilst we work, God says, my spirit is in your midst. The difficulty of the work isn't denied. The possibility of being discouraged is real.

[ 19 : 26 ] But perhaps when we're feeling like we're fighting a losing battle and everything looks to be covered in fog, we can't see which way is up. We can't see how we're moving forward.

Perhaps our perspective needs to be readjusted. With all the media buzz around the continual so-called progress our country is making, as it systematically attacks basic truths about what it is to be human, and all the ideologies that go with that, we can feel very weak indeed.

Hushed, pushed to the sidelines, written off, do we need to rethink things? Has God's word become out of date? By no means. God's kingdom wasn't thwarted by the superpowers of days gone by.

Egypt and all its magicians and chariots were no match for God and his people. Canaan, with all its might, was no match because God is committed to his work.

He's behind it and as his people do his work, we can have confidence that he will achieve all that he's committed to. But that isn't the only encouragement.

[ 20 : 43 ] We've seen a looking back at how God has been with his people in the past, how he's been faithful. But Haggai goes on to turn our attention to what God will do. And so we see in verses 6 to 9 God's promised future.

God's promised future. We keep going with our work now because we knew that in the end God undertakes to bring about the ultimate fulfillment of all that he's promised and it will be more glorious than anything before.

Our work is strengthened by the fact that God has a clear picture of what will be built in the end.

That picture is, verse 9, that the latter temple will be more glorious than the former.

Solomon's temple will hold nothing to the latter one. Israel had faced toil. We saw last week before they'd even begun work that their harvests were hard.

Money was in short supply. They were facing curses in all their produce. The work of restoring the temple to its former glories would be an expensive one.

[ 22 : 00 ] There probably wasn't much hope for what it would amount to because of their sparsity. But look at what God says. Verse 7, He will shake the nations and their treasuries will pour into the temple.

God says He will see that the temple has what was needed. And of course, this has happened to a certain extent through King Darius and his empire.

As we read in Ezra, it was Darius who essentially made it that his empire was footing the bill for building the temple. Here's a partial fulfillment already of what we read here.

And then later on in Herod's day, the temple was restored again to its physical, material grandeur. God says, verse 8, Don't worry about the materials for the work.

I'll provide them because the silver is mine and the gold is mine. How much of it? All the gold belongs to God.

[ 23 : 08 ] All the silver belongs to God. Placing physical, material grandeur on the temple would be no impossibility for him. But beyond providing the material things that were lacking for the temple, God is promising to do much, much more than that here.

The greatest tragedy in the temple's history was when God's glory withdrew from it. And so he says, verse 7, I will fill this house with glory. And it's not just going to be riches of gold and silver, but with a glory that means it will be, verse 9, greater than it has ever been before.

As we saw already, this prophecy came during the Feast of Booths and that was a feast that was instituted whilst Israel were still in the wilderness.

But it was also given for when they reached the promised land. When the feast was first celebrated, it would have brought a sense of longing for the land. But when they arrived in Canaan, they would have needed to be reminded that even Canaan was not the goal.

It was not their final home. And so in the midst of prosperity in the land, it would have been a reminder to them as they celebrated this feast that there was a better city waiting for them, that there was a new Jerusalem in store, that there was a wonderful kingdom that was yet to come.

[ 24 : 34 ] And so God says, verse 6, in a little while, he is going to intervene and establish that kingdom throughout the whole world.

He will bring about greater glory in the temple. He will bring this greater city into reality. He will bring into reality the final hope that his people have been clinging on to.

So whilst things look bleak, he's saying, in a little while longer, I will make things right in the end.

And so whilst there was a yearning for past glories amongst the remnant, the command to them was still to work. That hasn't changed. That's what's reiterated from last week.

Verse 5, work, keep working, for I'm with you. And God is saying, keep doing the work of building the temple, even when the work does look slow and unglamorous, even when the work of planting the gospel in people's lives doesn't look like it's building the kingdom.

[ 25 : 41 ] Work, keep going, keep doing it. Evangelism, Bible study, training people for ministry, they hardly look like they're going to cause ripples across the whole world.

It might be more tangible to try to save the environment, to make a real difference materially in people's lives right now. Of course, they're not bad things to do, but we mustn't stop the work that we've been given to do as a church, for it is in ministering God's word as a church that we are investing in this kingdom that won't be shaken, that won't be burnt away.

As we do the work of clearing the rubble, of standing for the truth, of continuing to live lives that honor God and bring people into his kingdom, God will ensure that it progresses.

He's the one who ensures the progress of his kingdom. It's he who builds it. We must remember that when things look fruitless and hopeless even, God has promised a glorious conclusion to world history.

And it's one that he himself guarantees. Look at the constant action words used of God in these verses. God says in verse 6, I will shake.

[ 27 : 06 ] Verse 7, I will shake and I will fill. Verse 9, I will give. God promises to shake the world so that everything would be turned upside down.

In the present, now, the world might look like it's winning whilst the church is in retreat. We can feel that when we hear of a country en masse voting to legalize the brutal killing of children, we can feel that we're losing, that the game is up.

But the story isn't over. When Christ was crucified and the temple curtain tore, the earth was shaken. As Jesus was raised from the tomb and the stone was rolled away, the earth was shaken. Just as God said he was going to do that here, as he was going to shake the heavens and the earth, the arrival of Christ did that. God has promised a kingdom that will be unshakable.

That's what the writer of Hebrews tells us. And when Christ came, that was what he established. And so, as he is the true temple, we can be more sure of this promise, of this wonderful future, of this city that's yet to come, of the temple spreading throughout the whole world.

[ 28 : 39 ] And so, as we work, as we herald Christ's victory, as we pour our lives into building with living stones, God guarantees the ultimate and final establishment of his kingdom that will, verse 9, bring peace, that will bring the perfection of how things were in the garden to the whole earth.

he'll bring peace everywhere as the whole earth becomes his temple. Peace everywhere as his kingdom will extend to every corner of this earth.

And so, each piece of rubble that was cleared away, each brick that was laid, that was investing in this future. it was investing in the future that Christ has sealed and that he will bring into full realization at his return.

Just as each piece of faithful service that we do shows God at work in our hearts, each piece of faithful service we do like that is also investing in this same future, this kingdom that's unshakable, building things that won't be burnt away.

Our work is not in vain no matter how much it looks like it. God will ensure that his kingdom stands gloriously and unshakably in the end and not even the gates of hell will prevail against it.

[ 30 : 35 ] So as we look around at the world and it can often seem like we're in the midst of a fog, these two encouragements are the way out of it. Adjusting our perspective to know what is true about God in history and what he's promised to do in the future.

And so God says, work for I am with you.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Father, we are astonished at what you have promised to do in this world.

And we pray that you would stir our hearts to be amazed with anticipation of what your kingdom will look like when it is established fully and finally forever at the Lord's return.

And as we have a vision for that, would you use it to spur us on in all that we do? For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.