

Losing the Anti-Midas Touch

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Preacher: Josh Johnston

[0 : 00] Now, let's turn to our Bible reading for this evening. We're returning again to the little book of Haggai, and we're going to be reading chapter 2, verses 10 to 19.

It's right towards the end of the Old Testament. We've seen that the Israelites who were able to return to the promised land had neglected to build the temple, so Haggai had spoken to them to explain that their struggles were curses from God.

But once they'd returned to work, God reassured them of his presence with them, and he promised them last week a temple of even greater glory to come. And now, verse 10.

On the 24th day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ask the priests about the law.

If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priests answered and said, no.

[1 : 20] Then Haggai said, if someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean? The priests answered and said, it does become unclean.

Then Haggai answered and said, so it is with this people and with this nation before me, declares the Lord. And so with every work of their hands and what they offer there is unclean.

Now then, consider from this day onward before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord. How did you fare? When one came to a heap of 20 measures, there were but 10.

When one came to the wine vat to draw 50 measures, there were but 20. I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail.

Yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord. Consider from this day onward, from the 24th day of the ninth month, since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn?

[2 : 34] Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on, I will bless you.

Amen. This is God's word. Do turn again in your Bibles to Haggai chapter 2.

We find suspense often a hard thing to deal with. For those of us who are familiar with Netflix, you'll know the sweet relief of the next episode playing automatically.

No more need to wait for a week to find out what's going to happen after the cliffhanger. No, no.

Suspense done away with. But the Israelites of Haggai's day had to deal with a lot of suspense.

There was the question of what the temple they were supposed to be rebuilding would look like in the end. Would it be anything like what had gone before? And after last week's prophecy, who knows at what point the greater glory of the latter temple will exceed the former.

[3 : 48] When, if at all, will they see it? But there was another great deal of suspense to contend with. In chapter 1, it had been spilt out to Israel that their frustrations at harvest time were all at the hand of God.

Their labors produced little. That's what Haggai declared to the people. In the midst of their strife, Haggai told them that it was God who'd brought it upon them.

Chapter 1, verse 9. You looked for much, and it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Then, chapter 1, verse 11.

I have called for a drought on the land, hills, grain, and all the rest. The cause of this was that the temple was lying in ruins, and God was placing curses on Israel.

So they heard God's voice, and they've responded by now. The rebuild is underway. And there was an encouragement from God because of this. But what would come of the next harvest?

[4 : 59] Israel were in suspense to know if the curses there under would indeed end. Would the small harvest turn into something better? And as God's word came again to Haggai, this time on the

24th day of the ninth month, the suspense will only end at the very last few words of this prophecy. Before the reassurance of God's kindness, in verse 19, there needs to be some further explanation of what has happened. And that's what we have in the first two points this evening, before a line is finally drawn under the whole ordeal as we move to the third point.

So we have first, in verses 10 to 14, the infectiousness of ignoring God. Second, in verses 15 to 17, we have rebellion repaid with ruin.

And then in verses 18 to 19, we have building leads to blessing. So first, the infectiousness of ignoring God. If we refuse to bow the knee to God in a single area of our lives, then no matter how many other Christian things we do, they're stained by that refusal to listen to God.

If we get on well with other Christians and we attend regularly to church and all the rest, but don't take Jesus seriously, and we aren't concerned with building his church, then that undermines everything else.

[6 : 33] To turn it into a maths equation, say your life is made up of ten parts, and in nine of those, you're gladly submitting yourself to God's words, but in one you aren't and won't.

Even when you're confronted about it, you won't heed God's word, then that one part corrupts all the others. Building God's church is an area that mustn't be neglected like that one part.

Nine-tenths of a life in submission to God is not a life in submission to God. That single area contaminates everything else. All efforts at holiness will be undermined if we ignore God's true temple, the Lord Jesus, and if we ignore his church that he's building in this world.

By this time in Haggai, work has begun again on the temple. In fact, we're now exactly three months on from the day Israel responded to the first prophecy and got back to work.

This date on its own doesn't seem as significant maybe as some of the other dates we've seen.

However, it was now the time of year of looking forward to harvest, hoping for good returns.

[7 : 48] The seed had been planted and nothing else could be done. We'll come back to that later.

But the other significant timing in this passage is that it is a word from God at the time of verse 18.

The laying of the foundation of the temple. This is a key juncture for the restoration. And so God speaks again to bring clarity to Israel about what has happened and why.

Not that anything of what's happened already should have come as a surprise to them. God has simply been doing as he said he would in the law. The curses shouldn't have been a surprise. But it ought to serve as a further warning for the future to not repeat the same mistakes.

It is after all the priests who Haggai is addressing in this passage. They were the teachers of the law. And it's no coincidence that this passage comes between two prophecies of future victory for God's kingdom and his people.

Last week's greater temple that is to come. And then next week we'll see another promise of victory. So in between these two promises for the future we have this warning.

[9 : 04] And if the priests are clear on what has happened then that would help Israel to not get caught up in what is yet to come to the point that they neglect what they're meant to be doing in the present.

This would serve as a further warning for Israel to heed. And so Haggai asks two questions of the priests. They seem obscure to us. We don't really consider much about food being unclean or clean.

Certainly not in any spiritual sins. The first question, verse 12. If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and then touches any other food with that garment would the other food then become holy too?

Now in this day they wouldn't have had their nice airtight Tupperware containers or even a little sandwich bag to carry their leftovers in. They would have wrapped their food up to carry it a bit like putting it in a pocket.

So does the holiness of the food pass through that garment and make other food holy too? That's the question. Now this specific scenario doesn't present itself in Leviticus 7 with all the similar laws but it's pretty straightforward for the priests to conclude from those principles that the answer is no.

[10 : 19] No, holiness is not transferable in that way. So question two, verse 13. What about if someone has touched a dead body and so becomes unclean because of that?

If they touch the food does the food then become unclean? Yes, it does. Holiness doesn't necessarily spread by touch but uncleanness does.

So much so that if the holy and the unholy touch it's the holy that becomes contaminated. Think about it as a rotten apple in a bowl. It ruins the others not the other way around.

Or in our staff offices when someone comes down with a cold as happens every winter or the latest vomiting bug we don't put them in a room with all the people who are well and healthy in the hope that that will get rid of the bug.

No, no, I stay as far away as possible and if they shake my hand I'm straight to the kitchen to wash it. Unholiness, sin, uncleanness those are the things that are infectious and contagious not the other way around.

[11 : 35] With that established Haggai then lands his punch in verse 14. So it is with this people this nation before me every work of their hands all that they offer here at the temple is unclean.

In mythology King Midas was able to turn anything that he touched into gold and so we often talk about the Midas touch when someone's able to bring success to what they do but here Israel have the anti-Midas touch.

Everything they touch all that they do with their hands even bringing offerings are tainted and stained. Or to put it another way the temple that lay in ruins was like a corpse was like a corpse in their midst and as it lay there it polluted the people so that nothing they could do was holy.

It wasn't the temple itself that infected them but as it lay there untouched unfinished uncared for it showed that Israel had put their fingers in their ears and they were ignoring God.

It showed that their own endeavors mattered more than God's kingdom their own paneled houses over God's house. And so as the temple was in their midst like that it was the siren that was ringing and saying these people are unclean everything they do is unclean.

[13 : 11] This people are in rebellion before God. Notice again in verse 14 they haven't stopped offering sacrifices but what they do offer is now unclean.

Israel wouldn't have claimed to be rebelling against God they were still doing religious activities still arriving at the rubble of the temple and offering their observance but it was all stained by the fact that they hadn't submitted to God.

This is an uncomfortable truth to have pressed him but can't it be common for us to create metaphorical or imagined stacks of the things that we do on one side are the things that we do for God it's a nice tall stack we do lots of that and then there are things on the other side that we're aware that we shouldn't be doing or that maybe we should be doing and we're not.

when we look at the stacks we think that big one makes everything okay. We might be aware that okay this one area pulls us down a little bit but we'll tell ourselves that it's okay to keep doing it if we're comparing the stacks it's 90%, 95%, 98% doing the right thing trying to submit to God living to please him but the truth is that disinterest in building the church cannot be overlooked.

Now there might be some of those things in our favor that we know we don't always do perfectly but we're striving to we want to we long to but nonetheless it's the unwillingness to submit in the 1% the thing in the negative stack or we're disinterested in what Christ wants most that stains everything else that's what shows where our hearts really are that's what's been exposed in Israel bring all the offerings you like take communion as much as you like put as much money in the offering plate as you like come to church every week even but if you won't submit to God in everything if his kingdom and his church won't come first if the true temple the Lord Jesus is not giving given everything then that corrupts all else the obedience of faith must be pervasive all encompassing so that we want to live for Christ with all that we have and that doesn't mean that from now on we are to live in perfection of course not but it must mean that we're prepared to let the word of God work in us that we're prepared to listen to rebuke and to prioritize

[16 : 18] God's kingdom and his priorities if we don't if we're not willing to then that is the corpse that will spread spread uncleanness throughout maybe we won't want to give up our relationship with someone we knew that isn't right one that pulls us away from giving Jesus everything friends small group leaders try to talk to us about it but it's off limits and then we have divided loyalties we're trying to play in two camps we try to play our part at church do the right things but all the while the relationship trumps the temple it's more important than God's kingdom when the crunch comes it's the relationship prioritizing instead what we want over what God has said now temple building as we've seen in the past couple of weeks is building with living stones we're not building a building with bricks and wood we're building the church the body of Christ so perhaps some of us are happy to come to church to take communion but when it comes to playing our part we don't really have an interest we certainly wouldn't want to push ourselves to be involved in the ministry of the church

there are plenty of others who could do that

I just want a nice sermon I want to sing my favorite hymns say my prayers talk to my friends and come back again next week well be careful Israel were told that their unwillingness to listen to God about prioritizing him meant that their offerings were unclean if we refuse to bow the knee to Jesus for the sake of his kingdom then no matter how many other Christian things we do they will be stained by that refusal to listen to God and Haggai goes on to spell out the further consequences of that verses 15 to 17 he goes on to say that rebellion is repaid with ruin ultimately refusing to bow the knee to God on anything will result in the experience of curses the prophets were sent to bring Israel back from the brink they were sent to reinforce the covenant that was made at Sinai Israel were told to circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn do not harden your hearts but Israel had warnings about the temple ruins in their midst and how that made them unclean Haggai wasn't the first way that God was calling them to repent in this look at verse 15 before stone was placed upon stone in the temple how did you fare whilst the temple was ignored how did you fare we've seen a bit of this already in chapter 1 they faced curses at the end of their labors they only experienced frustration verse 16 when it looked like they might have a harvest yield of 20 measures it was only 10 when it looked like it might be 50 measures it was only 20 their work ended in ruin all that they did was met with verse 17 toil blight mildew and heal clear signs of judgment

Israel would have known from their history what was happening yet verse 17 you did not turn to me their failure to listen was a rebellion their failure to prioritize their lives around God and his priorities was a rebellion and it was met with curses if we let God's word wash over us if we refuse to listen and follow and respond if we're unconcerned with seeing the church built and Jesus honored then the future for us is frustration and toil futility and turmoil and these curses are but a taste of what it will be like if we won't listen to him that is frightening Jesus is the true king of this world he has offered peace terms to us he's reached out his hands with the offer of peace offering to spare us a terrible future if we're loyal to him if we trust him if we follow him if we listen and respond to him in faith and take seriously what he's asked us to do but if we don't if we think we know better if we think he can be king of 99% of us that we can have our religious devotion that he can have our religious devotion but not our sacrificial commitment to building his church not our wholehearted commitment to the

Lord Jesus and whatever that looks like then we are rebelling against the king who will destroy all that is evil and wrong that is frightening if we are more interested in assembling things for our own amusement and building our bank balances constructing our careers so that we neglect the necessary work that God has given to us then these things might be a corpse in our midst that stains everything else that we do this serves as a stark warning that ought to be heeded but that wasn't the end of the story it certainly wasn't the end of the story in Haggai's day and it doesn't need to be the end of the story today for Haggai finishes by saying verses 18 to 19 building leads to blessing God can bring fruitfulness from frustration when God's word is heard and responded to then frustration turns to fruitfulness there is restoration and we remember that particularly this evening as we celebrate communion the end of the story doesn't have to be ruined what was it that changed things here verse 18 it was the day that the foundation of the temple was laid

[23 : 12] Israel kneeled their colors to the mast they responded in faith the foundation of the temple signaled their intent to respond wholeheartedly to him that's the turning point in all of this verse 15 consider before stone was placed upon stone in the temple it was calamity hardship fruitlessness ruin but verse 18 since the day that the corner stone the foundation stone was laid from that day on verse 19 God says I will bless you when we heed his word and respond to him then we don't need to fear judgment or ruin as we listen to him and his word works in us so that we're happy to give up an evening to invest in students so that we're happy to give generously of our time and our money for the work of the gospel that proves that we're not afflicted with the anti-Midas touch

Israel had a privileged heritage at Sinai God made a covenant with them that gave them the status as his treasured possession they amongst all the other nations were his treasured possession but with that Israel were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation they had great privilege but that didn't get them a free pass on listening to God they were to be a kingdom of priests a holy nation they were to display to the world what their God was like to be holy as God was holy they were to minister to the world the blessings of God how could Israel be holy how could Israel possibly be a

kingdom of priests when they were happy to let the temple lie in ruins in their midst they were happy to build and build they did but chapter 1 verse 4 it was building their own lovely paneled houses but now that they had heard

God's word now that they had responded to him on the 24th day of the ninth month as they laid the foundation of the temple they had committed again to building God's kingdom to being faithful to him to playing their part in all that God has purposed the date is significant as well because it wasn't just the day of the foundation being laid it was also the point in the year when all the seed was already out and been planted verse 19 is the seed yet in the barn at this time of year the answer to that would have been no their experience of curses has meant that previously the vine the fig tree the pomegranate the olive tree have yielded nothing and here is the suspense that Israel face the seed is no longer in the barn it's out it's planted cast for another year but what was going to happen more hail more blight more mildew no none of that from this day on

I will bless you say goodbye to the anti-Midas touch now from any human perspective it was far too early to tell what was going to happen with the crops even the most experienced farmer couldn't predict it but the word of the lord has come and as sure as the curses came for ignoring him so sure will be the blessing for responding to him and just as the curses that Israel faced were a foretaste of the greater curse that is to come for those who harden their hearts to God so too is this blessing a foretaste of the greater blessing that is to come Israel could at this point with confidence anticipate a fruitful harvest and prosperity because God had said I will bless you and we too through our true temple can anticipate with that same certainty greater prosperity than even

Israel had at their high point when they had taken Canaan when they had David's greater son Solomon when they had his grand temple even when they knew real material flourishing all of that was a fortieth of the ultimate blessing and the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenant for we have a greater temple we have the greatest son of King David and we look forward to the kingdom that will never fade or spoil that will never be shaken where all that is in it will only be fruitful God says I will bless you that's why we must heed God's word that calls us to be builders and participate in the ways that we can for some of us that might feel small but as Simon was encouraging us this morning we all have a job each day we wake up and think today is a day where

[28 : 47] I can serve God and do my bit and as we do so each sacrifice that we make to do that whether it costs us a career a comfortable retirement or whether it costs us the lifestyle that we've always dreamed of each of these sacrifices are part of us as a church kneeling our colors to the mast responding in faith to God and they are evidence that his word is at work in us and so he says with greater clarity with greater certainty to us I will bless you Amen let's pray Father we do give you great thanks for the

Lord Jesus for all that he has achieved for us for all that his life and death and resurrection means that we have a wonderful hope in store work in us that nothing would be of more significance nothing would be a greater pull on our desires on our time on our affections than the Lord Jesus and his kingdom for we pray in Jesus name Amen