

God's Word Stirs God's People

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[0 : 00] Well, to help us do that, we need the Word of God, of course. And we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this evening. You'll find it in the Old Testament in the book of Ezra, which comes after the books of Samuels and Kings and Chronicles.

And we're reading this evening in Ezra chapter 5. And just a short reading, the first five verses. Paul Brennan has been leading us through studies in this book.

And last week we looked at chapter 4, which showed the story of perpetual enemies, perpetual opposition to God's people, seeking to build for His kingdom.

And whatever age they find themselves living in, whatever the particular task, the enemies seem to be perpetual. And here, under Ezra's story, the people have come back from Babylon, from captivity, and are seeking to rebuild.

But as we saw last week in chapter 4, verse 4, the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose.

[1 : 09] All the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius, king of Persia. That went on for many, many years. Many, many years indeed.

And the end of chapter 4 says, The work on the house of God that's in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

But we pick up then at chapter 5, verse 1. Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Edo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Josedach, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. At the same time, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, and Shetherbosanai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?

[2 : 21] And they also asked them this, What are the names of the men who are building this building? But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews.

And they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius, and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

Amen. May God bless to us His Word. Well, good evening. Please have your Bibles open at Ezra chapter 5.

And also, it would be helpful if you could have a finger placed later on in the book of Haggai. We're going to be referring to Haggai a bit later. And if you've got one of the church visitor Bibles, that's page 791, I think.

791 for Haggai. If you don't have a church Bible, it's the third last book of the Old Testament. So do have a look at that and have that ready to look at a little bit later.

[3 : 28] That would be helpful. But we'll begin in Ezra 5. It's testing your Old Testament book finding abilities, isn't it?

Trying to dig that one out. But you'll get there. Good. Well, Ezra chapter 5. I want you to imagine with me a young Israelite man, 20 years old.

Let's call him Jonathan. The year is 538 BC. He was born in Babylon in captivity. He was one of the sons of Barzillai.

Remember him in the list in chapter 2? His parents had been exiled from Jerusalem many years before as young children. And they had raised him well.

They had taught him God's word. He was a keen young student, this Jonathan. He went to release the Pentateuch every week. He... Thank you. He was a trainee leader.

[4 : 33] And he'd found himself a nice girl. Jonathan made the rookie error of taking her to Starbucks on the first date. But he recovered from that. And things went better.

They got married. And the very year they got married was the year that the Lord was stirring the heart of the king of Persia. In Babylon 538 BC.

We saw that in Ezra chapter 1. The Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus. And the news filtered out that this was happening. That Cyrus was sending people back to Jerusalem.

Out of exile. They were returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. And this was incredible news. The words spoken by Jeremiah all those years before were being fulfilled.

God's people were going back to their homeland. To rebuild the temple. And the Lord wasn't just stirring up Cyrus' heart. He was stirring up the hearts of his own people.

[5 : 33] Including Jonathan's. And so they returned to Jerusalem. Full of expectation. Jonathan was especially delighted to go. There were question marks over his priest's legitimacy, remember?

He was one of the sons of Barzillai. He was meant to be a priest. But they couldn't prove it. The Urim and Thurman have to be consulted. But after the long journey, they were back in Judah.

The seventh month came around. And everyone gathered together as one man in Jerusalem. They built the altar. Sacrifices begun again at the altar in Jerusalem.

They kept the Feast of Booths. Everything was done to the letter. And within a couple of years, the foundations of the temple had been laid. There was great rejoicing.

There was such a shout. Jonathan lost his voice for a few days. Such was the shouting and rejoicing at that moment. But despite that encouraging start, very quickly, opposition arose.

[6 : 39] We saw that last week. First, it was very subtle. But it quickly escalated. And before they knew it, there were people on the building site, making them afraid to build.

They were fearful. Political pressure was applied. Before they knew it, they were drowning in political red tape. Bureaucracy, they couldn't do anything. The building stopped. The building stopped. And it stopped for a long time.

Sixteen years go past in a single verse. Look at the end of chapter 4, verse 24. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped.

And it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius. That was sixteen years. Nothing happened. The year is now 520 BC.

Jonathan is now in his mid-thirties. He's 39. He's a young man. Some of you got that. He's got three teenage children.

[7 : 45] The heady days of rebuilding the temple seem like a distant memory. The building sites are wasteland. There are trees growing up where the foundations were. It's shrobland.

It's a long time ago. Those great days of laying the foundations of the temple. Nothing's happened. Jonathan's done the best for his family.

They've got a house. They've got panelled walls. But life is pretty tough, actually. The harvests haven't been great. They're constantly struggling for food.

His investments have done nothing in the last decade. And apathy has well and truly set in.

Lethargy is how you would sum up not just Jonathan's attitude, but the attitude of all those who had with great enthusiasm returned from exile 18 years before.

What would the future hold for Jonathan for his children? What would come of the temple? There was nothing to actually see anymore. You couldn't see the foundations.

[8 : 47] What would become of God's dwelling place? What would happen to God's great promises? Could God deliver on his promises? Would the temple be rebuilt?

It's hard to see a way forward, isn't it? If you're Jonathan and others who've returned and seen nothing happen for 16 years.

But the 29th of August, 520 BC ticks around, and everything was about to change.

Within the month, Jonathan and many others will be back on the building site rebuilding. It would have restarted. Look again at the start of Ezra 5, verse 1.

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, the son of Edo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Josedach, arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

[9 : 53] And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. Now we're going to draw out three things from these verses this evening.

And we're slowing down a bit. Because, in part, the narrative slows quite substantially. The final verse of the previous chapter covers 16 years.

And these opening verses of chapter 5 cover a matter of weeks. So what's going on? And we're also going to note what these prophets said. Haggai and Zechariah, particularly Haggai.

What was it he said that got the people moving? When nothing had happened for 16 years, why suddenly this burst of activity? What did he say? So first thing to notice, three things.

Number one, in verse 1, there's a reminder of who is really in charge. There's a reminder of who's really in charge. Notice that Haggai and Zechariah prophesy in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

[11 : 01] Who was over them. As Derek Kidman notes, this little phrase is a gentle reminder of man's accountability and heaven's help.

See, ultimately, neither the king of Persia nor any other ruler is our master. Only the God of Israel is over us.

Only the God of Israel was over them living there in Ezra chapter 5. We are under his sway. We are under his word. No one else. Now, to the men of Israel who were living at that time, to Jonathan and his friends, well, it seemed to them, didn't it, after 16 years of no progress on the temple, it probably seemed to them that the king of Persia absolutely was their master.

He was the one in charge. It seemed to them that the local authorities who were wrapping them up in red tape, who had put a stop to the building works, they were the ones who held the power.

The men of Israel felt utterly powerless. They were too afraid to build. The initial discouragement, which would have been such a blow after all the positivity surrounding the laying the foundations, that understandable discouragement has perhaps now given way, after 16 years, to a sort of defeatist attitude.

[12 : 26] It's never going to happen. The temple's never going to be rebuilt. Apathy, lethargy had set in. God's forgotten about us.

Just look at the temple building site. You can't even see the work we did. It's just weeds. It's a wasteland. They've perhaps forgotten that there was, in reality, a higher throne.

The God of Israel was over them. That's the great reality. And they need to know that with fresh realization. The king of Persia was not their ultimate authority. The God of Israel was.

And ultimately, they and we will answer to the God of Israel, not to the kings of this world. And as well as that fact, that they answered to God, not man, is the reminder that they were not alone.

They perhaps felt very much alone. But the God of Israel, verse 1, was over them. The God of Israel was over them.

[13 : 30] It may not have looked like it to them. But God had not changed. His promises had not altered over the years.

His power had not diminished. His promises were no less solid than they had been 16 years previous. The God who made the heavens and the earth, the God who promised to be their God, was still their God.

And into this situation of discouragement and quiet desperation, God, who is over them, speaks. God speaks and everything changes.

So here's the key thing tonight. Secondly, we see God's word, which moves God's people to do God's work.

Just look again over these verses 1 and 2. The prophets prophesied. And then, verse 2, Zerubbabel and Jeshua arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

[14 : 37] The prophesying of these two men, the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, had a radical impact. After 16 years with nothing happening at the temple site, within a matter of weeks, there is activity once again on the temple building sites.

The building work has recommenced. See, God's word moved God's people to do God's work. God's word also moved the political powers.

God is able to stir the hearts, not only of his people, but the hearts of kings too. We'll see that next time as we look on to the rest of chapter 5 and 6. God moves kings. But particularly here, at the side of 5, God moves his own people.

He stirs them to action. It was absolutely transformative. God's word to his people then. Now, we don't know a huge amount about Haggai or Zechariah, apart from what's really here and in their prophecies.

But they erupt onto the scene at this very moment in history with an intense activity, a burst of activity over a matter of weeks and months. It's a very condensed period of time.

[15 : 53] It's like between now and Christmas, a very concerted, intense effort. And everything changes. They proclaim God's word.

And that is what God's people then needed more than anything else. They were afraid. They had stopped the work on the temple for years.

The thing they needed more than anything else was the word of God. They needed the truth that casts out fear. And that is what they got.

God spoke. And everything changed. Now, we're going to focus particularly on Haggai's prophecy, partly because it's short and concise.

But we're going to focus on that. So do flip over to that, if you can. Page 791, if you've got one of the church visitor Bibles. And what was it that Haggai said?

[16 : 56] What was so transformative? What did the Lord say through him to God's people then? We'll have a look.

Haggai chapter 1 and verse 1. And these opening words locate precisely the very day on which Haggai started to preach.

It says there, 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. Now, to translate that into our calendar terms, it's the 29th of August, 520 BC.

18 years since the returners entered Jerusalem. 16 years since the work on the temple started and then promptly stopped.

But look on to the end of chapter 1 of Haggai. The last sentence or two. It says this, 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.

[18 : 11] In our calendar terms, the 21st of September, 520 BC. A matter of a week. Three weeks from when Haggai first started to speak. Three weeks.

And work resumes on the temple site. And look at what he said. So verse 2. These are the words Haggai said to God's people then.

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 panelled houses while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore 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.

[19 : 15] And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. See, Haggai identifies the problem. There is a serious issue with inertia, passivity, apathy.

The people are saying the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Not today. Not now. Another time. Just not now. The time has not yet come.

The political situation isn't ideal. We'll ruffle feathers if we do this. We'll cause trouble. Just remember what happened last time. Remember the opposition we got. But Haggai goes straight to it, doesn't he?

You say it's not the time to build the Lord's house. But clearly you felt it is the time to build your own houses. You have your paneled houses.

You have a roof over your head. But the dwelling place of the Lord, it lies in ruins. Is it any wonder then that their lives are a struggle?

[20 : 25] He says to them, notes at the end of verse 5, consider your ways. And he goes on to list their present circumstances, verse 6.

Poor harvests. Not enough food to eat or drink. They can't clothe themselves properly. The money is draining away. Life is not going well. Now none of that would have been a surprise to them.

If you were to ask Jonathan, how's life going? He would have said, it's pretty tough. It's not easy. They knew that life was hard and not going well.

But they've perhaps not made the connection that Haggai makes. He says, the dwelling place of God is in ruins. And your lives look in similar shape to the temple.

There is a connection, says Haggai. He spells it out in verse 9. Have a look. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little.

[21 : 29] 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 Jew.

And the earth has withheld its produce. Can you imagine God's people hearing Haggai's word? Imagine them gathered together like this. And Haggai is speaking to them. And he says that phrase. It's because of my house. It lies in ruins.

Your lives are a mess. Because my house is a mess. It would have been like a dagger into their souls, don't you think, to hear that?

The heart of the problem has been laid bare very clearly by Haggai. It's very clear. Their poverty was due to one thing. They had neglected their Lord.

[22 : 33] Because they had neglected to attend to the building of God's temple, all this poverty has fallen upon them, says Haggai. That is the base reason.

That is the deep explanation for why things are the way they are for God's people then. That is why life has been so hard. Yes, I'm sure there are plenty of other factors.

Opinion pieces in the Daily Jerusalem Chronicle would have pointed to a whole range of factors to do with the economy, the climate, political considerations. But at the root of it, at the root of it is what Haggai says here.

And God's people needed to hear it. They needed God's truth. Even though it was hard to hear. I don't imagine Haggai won any awards for being prophet of the year.

He wouldn't have been a very popular figure at the time. Nothing other than coming face to face with the truth about God and about themselves could have brought about the necessary transformation required for the temple to be built.

[23 : 42] Unless Haggai confronted the reality, nothing was going to happen with the temple. It was never going to get built. God's word to them at this point packs power that moves God's people to obedience and then is able to sustain that obedience.

Particularly necessary in light of the fear and the intimidation that the community had endured and were to continue to endure. That opposition was going to persist.

They needed more than anything else to hear God's words. God's word is always the greatest need for God's people then, but through every age and today.

And we can be so blinded by our own sin that we cannot see reality. The folk here were so blinded they needed Haggai to come and spell it out.

In the same way that Ezra's time just couldn't make the connection between their disobedience and their disastrous lives, so often we too fail to make that connection between our disobedience and perhaps lives that are a mess.

[25 : 00] Now sometimes our lives are a mess because the circumstances totally outwith our control. There's nothing we can do about it. But perhaps, sometimes, we need to consider, are things going wrong because I'm not submitting to the Lord in this area of my life or that area of my life?

The Lord, through Haggai, put his finger on the issue. Painful though it was. And it was necessary. It was transformative. Because what takes place is repentance.

And quickly too. Within three weeks, the rebuilding work has resumed. Look again from verse 12 there in Haggai.

It says, See, God's people heard what Haggai said.

They were cut to the heart. They heard the challenging word of God. And they responded with real repentance. They demonstrated the obedience of faith.

[26 : 31] They got back to work. The task God had called them to all those years before they got back to it. You see, God's word is effective.

God's word is powerful. It does things. It can transform this dull, passive, apathetic people in an instance. It can transform them and mobilize them.

Within a matter of days, they're back on the building site. Active in rebuilding God's kingdom. And that is what God's word does.

God's word challenges his people. It convicts us. It drives us to repent when we've gone astray. But it also encourages us.

Yes, it challenges. Sometimes it cuts very deeply. But it also, God also encourages us as well. Back in Ezra, let me remind you of what it says there.

[27 : 32] Stay in Haggai, but let me read to you from Ezra. It says this. Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, prophesied to the Jews who were in Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

That was the challenging word we've just thought about. But it goes on. Then Zerubbabel and Jeshua arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them.

Supporting them. Did you notice that, as Willie read earlier, it wasn't a hit and run job from Haggai and Zechariah. No, they brought the challenging word of God, which had its effect.

The building work started. But once it started, the prophets stayed. They supported them. They encouraged them in the task. And you get that sense of encouragement here in Haggai too.

Look at chapter 1, verse 13 of Haggai. It says, Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord.

[28 : 35] We'll look on to chapter 2, verse 4. Yet, now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedach, 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. So yes, God's word confronts and convicts.

But my goodness, does it comfort and encourage. Can you imagine what comfort God's people would have derived from hearing these words from Haggai? Just a few weeks before, Haggai's preaching cut them to the heart.

The pain of what he said. The tears they now not shed because of how they treated the Lord. Great pain. But a pain that drove them to repent.

[29 : 36] To return to faithful obedience. And now that same preacher, Haggai, Spake words of extraordinary tenderness.

Words that were put steel in their spines. The Lord says to them, I am with you. Work, be strong, I am with you. My spirit remains in your midst.

Fear not. The God of Israel, the creator of heaven and earth, says to his people, I am with you.

James Philip in his notes on this section says this, God is not always hammering at men. When we obey, he encourages us.

Isn't that wonderful? God does convict us where necessary. But he also encourages us. Have you not experienced that?

[30 : 38] The Lord is kind, isn't he? Perhaps there have been times where you have strayed. When God's word really has cut you to the heart. He's put his finger on something in your life that is wrong.

And we've repented. We've obeyed the Lord. And sooner or later, the Lord, in his mercy, encourages us. Perhaps it's a quiet word from a fellow Christian that brings real courage to us. Maybe it's a new friendship that brings real joy. New circumstances which bring real confirmation that the Lord is no man's death, that he is with us, right beside us.

Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. That's true, isn't it? The Lord encourages us.

But he encourages us to an end. The sign of the Lord's encouragement, the sign of his presence, the sign of his spirit in the midst of his people was their work.

[31 : 45] This wasn't just a sort of nice notion. This wasn't a sort of nice, warm, fuzzy feeling. No, this was God's word to get us to work.

God's word challenged them to get to work and he encouraged them in that work once they started. And that is always the indication of God's effective word is the reality of his presence in the midst of his people when they are at work building his kingdom.

And that for us is no longer building a physical temple in Jerusalem. But each of us is called to play our part in building the living temple built of living stones.

And we play our part, each of us, making and growing disciples of Jesus. Each of us has a role to play in that. And God's word will challenge us to prioritize that work if we've drifted into apathy and passivity.

If we're fearful of opponents, he will remind us to fear him above all, to get back to the work because he is the one in charge, not the rulers we can see.

[33 : 08] And as we heed that call, as we give ourselves to that work, he will encourage us and he'll encourage us with the fact that he is always with us. Here again, the words of Matthew 28 where Jesus speaks to his disciples as he commissions them to go.

He says, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I've commanded you.

and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. Get to work, says Jesus.

Be about gospel building, building the living temple of the living God, but remember, I am with you always. God's word moves his people to his work.

And lastly, briefly, before we finish, we see that God's word is met again with opposition. Flip back to Ezra with me, Ezra 5, and we pick it up in verse 3.

[34 : 31] At the same time, Titania, the governor of the province beyond the river and Sheth, I can't even say that, Shethar Bozanai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?

They also asked them this, what are the names of the men who are building this building? But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews and they did not stop until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by the letter concerning it.

So no sooner had God's people got back to work, God's word had stirred them up, moved them to get back to building, but no sooner had they done that, then the opposition is renewed.

And these guys, they ask, Judah for authorization for this project, who said you could do this? And you can sort of understand their inquiry in a certain way.

After all, no building had been taking place on the site for 16 years and suddenly there's a hive of activity. What's going on? But for God's people, you can imagine all the old fears resurfacing.

[35 : 46] The memory of 16 years ago when they started and were met by fierce opposition. it's all happening again. After a sudden burst of energy and enthusiasm, this could have had a crushing blow in them to see this renewed opposition.

But the eye of God was upon the work. It didn't stop. As we'll see next time, God moves moves rulers. But he does so as he first moves his own people.

God will do as he's promised. The temple would be rebuilt. Four years down the track, it would be finished. It would be done. Jonathan, who he met earlier, would be in his early 40s.

His children would be starting to make their way out in life. Not long. Very quickly, the temple is restored. But the thing that drove God's people to get at it, the thing that drove God's people to build was the word of God.

God's word spoken by Haggai and Zechariah. God's word is the power that moves his people.

We've not had time to delve into Zechariah's prophecy, but he says this in chapter 4.

[37 : 06] Zechariah says, this is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

It is God at work in the midst of his people by his spirit, pressing home his word to the hearts of his people. And so the question is, is God's word preached what we long for and prioritize?

Our great desire must be for the centrality of Christ's word in the midst of his church. That is what will transform. That is what will bring folk from death to life.

It is how people are brought into God's eternal family. Here, on a normal Sunday, as God's word is preached, it transforms. His word has the power to do that. It was able to transform these people to rebuild the temple in three weeks to get going again.

It is his same word that will transform a life. Someone who doesn't yet know the Lord to bring them into his eternal kingdom within a matter of weeks, he can do it.

[38 : 21] And perhaps you're here, you wouldn't describe yourself as a Christian or maybe just not sure. you're looking into things or keep coming.

This is the place where you can hear the word of almighty God. There is nowhere more important to be than in the presence of God's people as his word is opened and preached.

It's powerful to transform lives for all eternity. Because when God's word is central, things happen. Against all the odds, a kingdom is built. Let me pray and then we'll close our time together. Amen.

Father God, help us to respond to your word with faith.

No doubt, Haggai's preaching did not look impressive, but it transformed the whole community as they heard and responded to the word of God.

[39 : 44] And so, Father, please give each one of us great confidence in your word. It may not seem powerful to the watching world, but it is the power of salvation for men and women.

Your word can transform whole communities, whole countries, because of who it is who speaks. You are the almighty God of all creation.

You spoke this universe into being with a word, and that same word continues to transform. So give us faith to live not by what we see, but rather by what you say.

Help us in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.