

The Best is Yet to Come

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our Bibles and our readings this evening you will find in Haggai chapter 2, which you will find in page 791 of the Pew Bible.

Page 791, Haggai chapter 2. And we shall read the whole chapter together. Let us hear then the Word of God.

In the seventh month, on the twenty-first 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 Jehoshadak 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 Jehoshadak 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.

[1 : 19] 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.

I will shake all the 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.

On the twenty-fourth 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 priest 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 priest answered and said, No.

[2 : 25] Then Haggai said, If someone who is unclean, by contact with a dead body, touches any of these, does it become unclean? The priest 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 onwards. Before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, were there but ten?

When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. 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 twenty-fourth 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 barns?

[3 : 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. The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month.

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother.

On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel, my servant, son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring.

For I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts. Amen. And may God add his blessing to this, the reading of his word. I invite you to take your Bibles, and to turn with me again to Haggai chapter 2, which you will find in page 791 of the Pew Bible.

Haggai chapter 2, page 791. And as you do so, a moment of prayer. Make the book live to us, O Lord.

[5 : 00] Show us thyself within thy word. Show us ourselves, and show us our Savior. And make the book live to us, for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Amen. Well, even if you're not a football fan, I'm sure you will be very aware of the difficulties that Glasgow Rangers Football Club have experienced over these last four and a half years.

At one point, there were revelations almost every day of how they were managing, or as it turned out to be, mismanaging their finances. And this would eventually lead to them going into administration, and then liquidation quickly followed, as did a demotion to the bottom tier of Scottish football.

But I suppose the darkest cloud that hung over the club and its supporters all through this period was the uncertainty about the future. Would they go into administration and liquidation again?

Changes at boardroom level only sought to create more uncertainty, as the folks in charge seem to be more interested in lining their pockets than progressing the club.

[6 : 10] And although their difficulties are far from over, they seem to be more stable these days due to more changes at boardroom level again, and also the knowledge that they are back where they belong alongside Glasgow Celtic and the top tier of Scottish football.

And although not yet out of the woods with all their troubles behind them, having more clarity about the future has brought much-needed stability to the club. Sometimes the only way we can persevere in a difficult situation is if we have a clear vision of the future.

Last week in Haggai chapter 1, we saw that God's people were complacent. They had lost sight of their calling. God had slipped down their list of priorities. And so they received a word to challenge them, to call them back, to seek His kingdom first.

But in this evening's chapter, the same people feel extremely despondent. And what they need is not a word of rebuke, but a message of encouragement, a clear vision of the future to help them persevere.

And the same is true for us. Sometimes we need to hear a challenging word from the Lord, and He uses it to wake us up and to change us. But other times what we need most is a message of real encouragement, simply just to keep going.

[7 : 32] The Christian life is hard. Following Jesus often means we're faced with real difficulties. Perhaps you feel frail or weak or conscious of mistakes this evening.

If so, God's word is here to encourage you. In this chapter, God is saying, the future is bright for my people. The best is yet to come. Haggai speaks three times in this chapter, so we'll go with him, and we'll have three points.

Firstly, he tells us in verses 1-9, to look back to God's promises and to look forward to God's purposes. Secondly, in verses 10-19, God's blessing still comes by grace.

And then thirdly and finally, verses 20-23, God's victory is guaranteed. Well, firstly then, verses 1-9, looking backwards to God's promises and looking forwards to God's purposes.

In chapter 1, the people had received a word of rebuke, which had challenged their priorities and changed them, and they had begun to rebuild the temple. Chapter 1, verse 14. In chapter 2, we are now a month on, but the building work has been slow.

[8 : 47] The temple site was a mess, and remember they had no JCBs or mechanical diggers. And the work had been also slow due to Sabbath days, when no work could be done.

And also the seventh month was quite a month for feasts and festivals. And on these days, no work could be done either. The feast of trumpets had been on the first day of the month, followed on the 10th by the Day of Atonement.

And on the 15th day of the month began the week-long festival of booths, or festival of tabernacles. And during this week, the Jews would leave their houses and take residence in leafy shelters to remind them of their wanderings following the exodus from Egypt.

The festival of booths had become linked with a time of thanksgiving to God for His provision for the harvest. And they must have been really discouraged and hardly felt like celebrating as the harvest of 520 BC had been so poor.

Chapter 1, verse 6. They were discouraged, despondent, and in much need of encouragement. So the word of the Lord comes again by the prophet Haggai, chapter 2, verse 3.

[9 : 59] And just as in chapter 1, verse 3, the Lord's word reveals what was going on in the hearts and the attitudes of at least some of the people. Chapter 2, verse 3.

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? Solomon's temple, in which no expense had been spared, was destroyed some 66 years earlier.

And some of the returnees were old enough to remember it. The feelings of despondency and disillusionment were obvious as they looked at the ruins of the temple and the job that was ahead of them.

My wife Charlene and I, along with my wee boy James, are about to move house. Now, why did I say along with my wee boy James? I'm hardly going to leave him behind in the old flat. But anyways, we're about to move to a new house.

And the house we're moving to seems to have been unoccupied for a wee while. There will be a lot of preparatory work needing done before any paint touches the walls. Washing down the walls and the scutting boards, filling any holes in the walls, and then sanding down all the surfaces so that they're smooth.

[11 : 14] But that's nothing in comparison to the amount of what the Jews needed to do in order to get the temple site ready for building. God's house had been utterly destroyed and bumped to the ground by Nebuchadnezzar.

And to top all this off, the destruction, 66 years, you know, 66 years had taken its toll of the temple lying empty and in ruins. Before a start could be made in rebuilding the temple, a great deal of rubbish and mess had to be cleared.

The feelings of despondency and disillusionment were obvious as they looked at the temple, they saw rubble, mess and ruins. And probably weeds and plants had grown all over the temple site.

And they were thinking, this temple's rubbish. It's not like back in the day. They were looking back and they were comparing. I don't know about you, but I find comparing is never helpful.

When I first started the Cornhole training course some nine years ago, I found myself comparing myself with other students. And I got so discouraged. I'm not as articulate as him. My biblical knowledge has nothing in comparison to his.

[12 : 25] And dearie me, that guy can speak properly. It was so discouraging. But do you know the only thing that got me through? It was speaking to myself and saying to myself, Terry, you're 100% better at being Terry McCutcheon than anybody else in this class.

And for those starting the Cornhole course, that's a good line. You're 100% better at yourself than anybody else is.

And we all need to remember that to be ourselves. We're 100% better at being ourselves than anybody else. And I'm sure we can all identify with this on a human level, comparing.

But we can also do this with the works of God. Works of God in various places and at various times. Maybe we look back to former ministries.

We look back to the good old days. But friends, if we are honest, when we look back to the good old days, our memories are often clouded with nostalgia. And all our looking back seems to do is to make the present situation look far worse than it really is.

[13 : 33] It didn't do the people of Haggai's day any good to look back and think of Solomon's magnificent temple and how that would compare to their own rebuilding work.

And it won't do us any good to look back and compare either. Listen to this. The smallness of our gifts may be a temptation to us. We are consciously so weak and so insignificant compared with the great God and His great cause that we are discouraged and think it in vain to attempt anything.

The enemy contrasts our work with that of others and with that of those who have gone before us. We are doing so little as compared with other people.

Therefore, let us give up. We cannot build like Solomon. Therefore, let us not build at all. Yet, brethren, there is a falsehood in all of this.

For in truth, nothing is worthy of God. The great works of others and even the amazing productions of Solomon all fell short of His glory.

[14 : 40] I find this so helpful not to compare with other works of God in different times or places, but instead to get on with the work that He has given in the time and place in which it has been given.

Having exposed their thinking, the Lord gives a word of strength and assurance to these dispirited, disillusioned, discouraged builders. You will see in verses 4 and 5 the same phrase is repeated three times.

Be strong. Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Joshua. Be strong, all the people. And work. Be strong and work.

I don't know about you, but work is the last thing I want to do when I'm discouraged and disillusioned. I would much rather stay in bed and opt for the death by duvet approach. Hugh McKenna once told me of a story of a man from Mary Hill who finally managed to get a job after being unemployed for 20 years.

And his wife was so excited that he'd managed to get a job after all this time that when he came home from his first day at work she said to him, what will I make you? She meant for his dinner. But he replied, make my bed.

[15 : 46] I've chucked it. He was not strong and he had no desire to work. But God's people have not to chuck it.

We have not to give up. We are to be strong and work. We are called to have a good work ethic. But the people of the Lord's success will not depend on their work ethic alone.

Notice what it doesn't say. It's not, be strong, I know you can do it. Be strong, I believe in you. God is not calling them to simply have a positive mental attitude.

No, he says, be strong, I am with you. The same great promise is chapter 1. But look at what the verse goes on to say.

It doesn't say, I am with you according to the promise I made you back in chapter 1 last month. No, it says, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt.

[16 : 45] My spirit remains among you. Fear not. God is calling them to look back to the past. But not to the temple of Solomon, but to the promise that he made to them when he brought them out of Egypt.

The Exodus was the blockbuster event in the history of God's people. Throughout the Old Testament, it's the big thing that the psalmists and the prophets point back to. If God could bring deliverance like that, then you can be sure he can help with present difficulties.

The same God that did great things in the past is among you today. So be encouraged. Not because there is a great figure like Moses or David among you, but that the Lord himself and his spirit is among you.

So do not fear. Looking backwards to his promises, looking forward to his purposes, verse 6 to 9. For thus says the Lord of hosts, In a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

I will shake all nations and the treasures of all nations shall come in and I will fill this house with glory. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former house and in this place I will grant peace.

[18 : 03] God is saying, look forwards to my purposes. Yet once more in a little while, it's always a little while with the Lord as one day with him is like a thousand years.

I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land and I will shake all nations. God had done a fair bit of shaking in the past.

He humbled proud Egypt by the ten plagues and destroyed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Psalm 68 describes these events as a shaking. But God says, I will shake again.

I will come like an earthquake and with great force. So don't fear all those powerful nations. I have them in my hands. The Lord would shake the nations.

Now what did this mean? And what would this shaking the nations look like? Well God was saying, I am going to rearrange the nations. And this is what it would look like. Nation would rise and fall over the next five centuries.

[19 : 02] Over the next five centuries, many empires would rise and fall right up until the time of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Persian Empire, the Syrian Empire, Egypt and Babylon all fell before the empire of Greece.

And then Greece and turn was crushed before the legions of mighty Rome. God was saying, I am going to shake. I am going to rearrange all the nations. And all you have to do, Judah, is to stand back and see my mighty actions.

Haggai was saying, don't fear all those powerful nations. God has them in his hands. And he is going to shake them for his own purposes. And that will all work out for your good.

Well, how would these shakings serve God's purposes? Well, the Greek Empire helped greatly. Alexander the Great's conquest served to spread Greek culture throughout the whole of the then known world.

And at that time, Greek became the universal language. Instead of the many different tongues that were used previously, you will know that most of the New Testament was written in Greek. Greek. Then the Lord used the Roman power for his purposes in taking the Christian gospel throughout the whole world.

[20 : 15] The Romans built marvelous roads which ran everywhere. And we still have some fine examples in Britain today. These roads were good, quick, and safe to travel upon.

They helped to spread trade. And the traders took the message of salvation to the furthest corners of the empire. And there was also the Pax Romana, the Roman peace, which guaranteed safety and protection to citizens throughout the length and breadth of the empire.

So God would shake the nations to produce a common language that would help the spreading of his gospel message. God would shake the nations in order to provide easy travel and the stability and the security of the Roman empire, which also contributed to the spread of the word.

So the Lord would shake. He would rearrange the nations. And that would all work out for their good. But what would be those purposes? Well, so that the treasures of all the nations shall come in in order that God would have a people, a people that would fill his house with glory.

Haggai is referring to Christ's kingdom. He is saying that God's chosen people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will come and make up a great kingdom of priests to serve the Lord.

[21 : 41] Revelation 7 and 9. And we know this even in our own day, don't we? That the shaking, the rearranging of nations has had this effect. Downstairs, there are 140 or so Iranian brothers and sisters who have come to this land due to all sorts of unrest in their home country.

A shaking has been going on. And because of this shaking, they are now here and now most of them find themselves not only in Scotland but now in Christ. God is continually shaking the world.

So we need not fear our current situation regards the European Union and even Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. God is on his throne and his sovereign hand is continually shaking the world in order that he may have a people.

God will fill his house with glory. The glory of the Lord and his people will fill this house. And that's how Haggai could assure them that the glory of this house shall be greater than the former.

Our minister's father, James Philip, writing on this, says, In view of the more modest building in which they were now engaged, the implication of this statement must surely be that a different kind of glory was now in view.

[22 : 59] In the past it was the material glory of the temple that gave it its magnificence. But God said he would do a new thing. What he was out to do was to build not so much a temple but a people.

The Lord was calling them to look forward to his purposes, his purposes that he has for all the nations. And what he was wanting them to see is that what they were doing, no matter how small or meager or insignificant it looked to them, all that they were doing was playing its part in those purposes.

And it's the same too for us, friends. No matter where we serve the Lord, be it the foreground or the background or even the playground children, there is no work for the Lord that is small or meaningless or insignificant, for it is the Lord's work.

Listen to this from our good friend and dear brother Alistair Begg. God has gifted you in a unique way, in a unique point in time, in order that you may be uniquely useful amongst a unique group of people, in order that you may fulfill a unique purpose.

In the words of the old children's song, as the children's song puts it, there is a work for Jesus that none but you can do. So, friends, let us not become discouraged, disillusioned or depressed.

[24 : 29] Let us look to the Lord's promise. I am with you. And let us remember his purposes. He will shake the nations so that he will call our people to himself.

And all that we are involved, either individually and collectively as a church, are all part of those great purposes. God called him to look back to his promises and look forward to his purposes.

But secondly, in verses 10 to 19, God's blessing still comes by grace. God's blessing still comes by grace. God's message through Haggai had given the people renewed enthusiasm for the task of building God's kingdom.

By the time we come to verse 10, three months had passed since their initial work began. No doubt they were encouraged and in good spirits. And this is the moment the Lord chooses to give them a special teaching time in verses 10 to 19 and reminds them of a very important truth.

The phrase, give careful thought, which we saw last week is used three times. The section ends with God's blessing. The question is, how does that blessing come about?

[25 : 44] Verse 11, ask the priest what the law says. If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?

The priest answered, no. Then Haggai said, if a person deviled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled? Yes, the priest replied, it becomes defiled.

The dialogue between Haggai and the priest may seem a little confusing at first, but the point really is quite straightforward. The law clearly stated that you could become unholy in God's sight by contact with something that was unholy.

But holiness could not be transferred in the same way. Verse 14 puts it very clearly. God's people may be doing good religious works by building the temple, but that does not make them holy.

God wants his people to see that his blessing does not flow from good works. The temple is not some kind of good luck charm.

[26 : 48] You can't catch holiness. They need to be cleansed by him. In verses 15 to 19, he gives them another illustration to remind them of their need.

He points them back to the famine conditions before the temple building began. Do you remember what it was like, he says? It was a time of half portions and dry cellars.

You had turned away from me and I struck you down with mildew and blight to waken you up and call you back. Don't ever forget that. Give careful thought to these things.

As they heard those words, the Israelites were in the sowing season. Building the temple would mean time away from the fields. It would require faith. As the next few months passed by, they would have to wait and put their hope in the Lord to provide for their needs.

But they would do so with verse 19 ringing in their ears. From this day on, I will bless you. He would provide all that they required. They were dependent on his grace alone.

[27 : 51] And friends, this is one of the hardest things for us to accept. If we've been Christians for a while, we often forget it. Our natural tendency is to think that doing good things makes us clean in God's sight.

But religious activity is not like refueling a car. It doesn't top up our holiness levels. Whether it's temple building, Bible reading, taking a public stand for the gospel, or attendance at church, or even preaching.

None of these things makes us holy in God's sight. We need his mercy and grace. Only Jesus can make us clean. Only Jesus can wash away our sin.

Just listen to these absolutely wonderful words. To whom does the invitation of the cross come? It comes to the failures.

The people who know they have gone wrong. The people who are filled with a sense of shame. The people who are weary and tired and forlorn in the struggle.

[28 : 52] The world picks up its skirt and passes by. It leaves you alone. It does not want to associate with you. You have gone down. You belong in the gutter.

And the world is too respectable to have any interest in you. But here is one. Here is one who is ready to receive you and accept you.

Sit down, he says. Wait. Stop. Give up your activities. Just as you are. I am ready to receive you and your rags and your filth.

rest. In your vileness. Rest. That's the great promise of the gospel. All of our righteousness is as filthy rags.

But God the Father clothes us in garments of salvation like the prodigal son. He puts a ring on our finger, a robe around our shoulders and gives us a seat at his feast.

[29 : 53] No matter how long we've been a believer, we never stop needing his grace. No matter how many times we fail and fall, he is willing to provide it.

It's just like the great hymn says, through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.

Haggai chapter 2 is given to fix our eyes in the future. It's a work for the weary. It says God's promises and purposes have not been broken. God's blessing still comes by grace.

And last but not least, verses 20 to 23, God's victory is guaranteed. God's victory is guaranteed. These verses read like something out of a disaster movie.

God's servant looks ahead to a time when there will be a cataclysmic and final upheaval. It's a scene of total destruction and a remarkable display of God's sovereignty.

[30 : 54] I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers. Horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

This prophecy is given to him, centers on the mysterious figure of Zerubbabel. He was the civil leader of the people at the time, more of a puppet king because of the Persians.

But nonetheless, he did have royal blood in his veins. He was a descendant of King David. And Haggai says, God has chosen him to be his signet ring. You may be wondering what the ring is all about.

The signet was a bit like a golden chain that a mayor might wear around his neck or the seal of the president. It was a sign of authority and authenticity. To have the ring was to have authority.

Back in 2 Samuel chapter 7, God had promised David that his line would continue forever. He would establish his throne forever. That one from David's line would sit on the throne forever.

[32 : 01] The great hope for the people of God was for a king who would deliver them from all their foes and bring peace and security to the land. And this is what God is promising here.

But the promise is so great that we have to ask ourselves, is it really all about Zerubbabel? I think it's clear the answer is no. Such are the magnitude of the events in this prophecy that someone greater must be in God's mind.

But Zerubbabel points us forward to the true king. The promises God gives are ultimately fulfilled in Christ. To use Tolkien's language, there will be one ring to rule them all.

A king who will bring salvation for his people and restore peace. And the salvation that he will bring, as we have read, will go hand in hand with judgment.

As he destroys his enemies, he will deliver his people. Perhaps that sounds a bit unpalatable to us. But not to a persecuted Christian or to a believer who has been pressed down and tormented for years.

[33 : 10] We need a king who is big enough to take care of our enemies, who can sit on the throne without worrying about any rivals. And God has such a king, and we can stand secure.

Psalms 2 puts it like this. Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters. The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger, and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.

Haggai's friends lived in days when the church felt despondent, and God's cause looked weak. Enemies in an atmosphere of despondency surrounded them, and Haggai too comes with a message for them, and a message for us.

It says, don't be afraid. The kingdom is in safe hands. A new day will dawn. The future is bright for God's people. In one of his books, Dale Ralph Davis tells the story of a fascinating minister from the highlands in the 1700s.

[34 : 29] Reverend Sage was a man of great strength, but he found kind invitations to come to church on a Sunday just didn't work in his parish. They were keen for games, but not for God and the gospel.

So Sage decided he needed a new approach to ministry, and so he challenged and defeated a local wrestler who went by the name of Big Rory. Reverend Sage defeated Big Rory in a fight, and Big Rory was a good sport and took his defeat well.

And before long, Reverend Sage and Big Rory became firm friends, and on Sundays they would round up the locals and drag them into church. Big Rory stood at the back of the building with a club in his hand as Sage expounded the scriptures.

It was all so inevitable. Sage wanted a congregation, and nothing would stand in his way. That's the spirit of these verses. God's victory is inevitable.

There's no enemy who can stop Christ's reign, no foe who will destroy his flock. The Lord Jesus Christ himself said, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not stand against it.

[35 : 45] So the Lord's word says to us, don't worry about all the political upheaval going on around you, my children. Don't be over anxious about your little Scottish country.

Don't fear what will happen. I am at work. There will be great shakings, great over turnings, over throwings, and fallings. The nations and the peoples all around about you are powerful.

But remember, I am more powerful still. In closing, friends, Haggai is a little book, but it brings a big dose of encouragement to a battered and broken church.

It calls us to labor on faithfully in our day, and to keep on putting Christ and his kingdom first. And it assures us that God's kingdom will endure. So we fix our eyes, not in what is seen, but what is unseen.

For what is seen is temporary, but what is seen, unseen is eternal. Amen. Let us pray together. The Lord Jesus Christ said, You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed.

[37 : 03] Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places, but I am with you, so do not fear.

So therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Amen. Amen.