

First things first

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- [0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this evening, which you'll find in the prophet Haggai. Now, if you have a church visitor's Bible, I think that's page 791.
- If you haven't, it's one of those little prophets that's hard to find near the end of the Old Testament, before Zechariah and Malachi, just right at the end there of the Old Testament. One of those we call the minor prophets, only minor because their books are short in comparison to Isaiah and these others.
- Not because their message is unimportant, and indeed, the message of Haggai and Zechariah is extremely important. We've recently finished a series in the book of Ezra, and if you remember, Ezra is all about the return of some of the people from exile to the land to begin rebuilding.
- And the building, in an early stage, was stopped. It didn't start again until the influence of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah.
- And so, it's very fitting that we're going to spend the next couple of Sunday evenings with Terry preaching us through this very, very important message. So, we're going to read together tonight Haggai chapter 1.
- [1 : 13] And you'll see it begins in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month. And the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.
- Thus says the Lord of hosts, These people say 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.
- It is, is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled 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.
- And he who earns wages does so to put them in a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.
- [2 : 24] Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it, that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You look for much, and behold, it came to little.
- 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 dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.
- And I have called for a drought on the land and on the hills, on the grain, on the new wine, the oil, and what the ground brings forth on man and beast and on all their labors. Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

[3 : 46] And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the 24th day of the month, in the 6th month, in the second year of Darius the king.

Amen. May God bless his word. I invite you to take your Bibles and to turn with me again to Haggai chapter 1, which you will find in page 791 of the Pew Bible.

And as you do so, a word of prayer. Lord, what we know not, teach us.

What we have not, give us. And what we are not, we pray that you would make us. In Jesus' name. Amen. Most of you know that I used to work with Hugh McKenna, at a charity called the Open Door Trust.

Sadly, it's a work that no longer exists. But the trust reached out to the homeless, those in prison, and to those struggling with alcohol and drug addiction. And one of the services which we provided was a weekly lunch club, where up to 100 folks were served with a lovely two-course dinner.

[5 : 05] And some of you here cooked those dinners and served those dinners. Dorian and Irene's curry was famous among the poor of Glasgow, long before it had ever touched the palate of a released awards student.

But there was a man who used to come to the lunch club. His name was Robert, and he was a poor soul, and he was alcoholic. And on occasion, he would ask to speak to the boss. That is Hugh.

He wanted to speak to Hugh. And sometimes the volunteers would say, Well, there's Terry. Do you not want to speak to Terry? And he'd say, No, I need to speak to the boss. So we would get Hugh to come and speak to Robert.

And on every occasion, Robert's opening line would be this. This isn't about money. Now, remember, this isn't about money. And Hugh would say, Okay, Robert, it's not about money.

And then Robert would tell Hugh a 10 to 15 minute story. And the story would always end with Robert asking Hugh for a couple of pounds. Maybe one pound fifty or two quid or something like that.

[6 : 06] And Hugh being Hugh, more often than not, would give it to him. It's not about money. But inevitably, it was always about money. And as we come to Haggai chapter one and to the verses that Willie has read for us, we can see that it's about rebuilding work.

And you might be sitting saying to yourself, Oh, I can see where we're going with this. We've hardly finished buying chairs for Kelvin Grove. No Terry's going to whack us with a sermon about giving deep and giving sacrificially to the work of the Lord.

Well, chapter one is about rebuilding work, which I suppose would cost money. But you Scottish Presbyterians will be pleased to hear that this chapter is not about money. It's the place that God has in our affections.

It's about the place that God has in our affections. God isn't after your money. God isn't interested in your money. And before the treasurers in the church get ready to shoot me, let me clarify what I mean.

God is interested in the place that he has in your affections. He is interested in the place that he has in your affections. For if God has his rightful place in your affections, then he will have you.

[7 : 18] And if he has you, then he will have the gifts, the talents, and the money, and everything else that he has given you to be a good steward of. This chapter is about the place that God has in our affections.

It's about first things being first. And if you were looking for a title this evening, then that would be it. First things first. I'd like to take the chapter under two headings.

Firstly, verses 1 to 11. God's word challenges our priorities. God's word challenges our priorities. And secondly, in verse 12 to the end of the chapter, God's word changes and comforts his people.

God's word changes and comforts his people. Well, firstly then, verses 1 to 11. God's word challenges our priorities. In the second year of Darius, the king, verse 1.

In the sixth month, on the first day of the month. Well, this gives us an insight into the state of God's people. They are under the reign of a foreign king and a foreign power. Darius, the king of Persia.

[8 : 24] They had been taken into exile under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, in the year 586 BC. And there are those who are able to correlate the calendar. And they can tell us that verse 1 is precisely August 29, 520 BC.

Willie, in his introduction, had said that the exiles had returned to the land. Well, they did return in 538 BC. Some 18 years earlier, under the reign of King Cyrus. Who the prophet Isaiah prophesied about.

And if you would like the best background reading to this book, I would suggest some reading of the book that we have been in recently with Edward. The book of Ezra. Chapters 1 to 4, maybe even to chapter 5, verse 2.

And here's what it says in Ezra chapter 1, verse 2. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia. The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.

And he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you, all his people, may his God be with him. And let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

[9 : 28] And rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And Cyrus didn't just give them his permission to go. He also gave them great wealth in order to build the temple.

And the people had returned with great health, great wealth, and great enthusiasm back to the land. Back to the land to build the temple and to worship the Lord.

And in Ezra chapter 3, verse 10, we are told that the foundations of the temple were laid. But then we are told that opposition arose. In verse 4 and 5 of chapter 4, we read.

Then 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. And chapter 4 of Ezra ends.

Then the work of the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped. And it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius, the king of Persia. The exiles had returned on the crest of a wave of great enthusiasm.

[10 : 32] With high hopes of rebuilding the temple. But external opposition and internal discouragement. Caused the rebuilding work in the house of the Lord to cease.

And friends, we must always remember that any real building work of the Lord will always come against these things. Every time the church rises to build, the devil will rise to blast.

The building work of the Lord will always come against these things. And only those who are prepared to face the opposition and discouragement. And to continue steadfastly in the face of it.

Will ever win through. The ingredients required for this are not enthusiasm. But blood, sweat, toil and tears. And that is why we must continue to back up and hold up in prayer.

Our minister and our leaders and men like them in these days. It takes blood, sweat, toil and tears in the building work of the Lord. It's not for the faint hearted.

[11 : 34] Our leaders need steel in their bones. Well, we're told in the second year of Darius the king in the sixth month. On the first day of the month. The word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet.

Haggai busts on to the scene here in verse 1. We're not told where he's from. We're not told who his father is. We're not told what he did for an occupation. All we're told about him is he's a prophet.

A messenger of the Lord. He busts on to the scene. And he has a four month preaching ministry. And as quick as he arrives. He disappears.

A friend described Haggai's ministry as sudden, short and successful. And as we're not given many details about him. This leads me to conclude just as with any prophet.

That the details of his message. Are more important than the details of the man. Well, what were the details of his message? I want us to note that this message is the word of the Lord.

[12 : 38] We're not told about the processes involved. How the word came to Haggai. We're just told that he brings the word of the Lord. And I also want us to note. That any work of the Lord.

Any real work of the Lord amongst his people. Is always started and sustained by the word of the Lord. Verse 2.

The word of the Lord comes. Thus says the Lord of hosts. These people say. The time has not yet come. To rebuild the house of the Lord. God's word exposes.

What was in the hearts. And the attitude of these people. He doesn't even call them my people. He calls them these people. The time has not yet come.

To rebuild the house of the Lord. Well, as we've already seen from. Ezra chapter 1 to 4. The work hadn't ceased. Because the people had done anything wrong.

[13 : 32] But I think it's true and fair to say. That the situation with which they found themselves in Ezra. Led to something becoming wrong. They had become apathetic.

And indifferent. To the rebuilding work. And this is what they were saying. It's not the right time. In fact. It will never be the right time. We're not building the temple.

We're skinned. The harvest hasn't been that good. We've not got any money. We've no money to build it. And it's not worth the hassle. Remember the opposition we got the last time.

Public opinion was against us. The government and everybody else was against us. And friends. This is absolutely unbelievable. The temple they were meant to be rebuilding.

Is the place where God had chosen to meet with them. Where the presence of God and his glory dwell. So what they were really saying is this. We don't really care if God is in the midst or not.

[14 : 30] We don't really care if his presence is dwelling with us or not. As verse 8 says. They were not interested in the Lord's pleasure. Or him being glorified.

It's absolutely unbelievable. The temple is where they met with the living God. And we sang earlier. Lord Jesus. Let me meet you in your word. We meet the Lord Jesus Christ.

The living word in the Bible. Now it would be like us saying. Get rid of the Bible out of the church. Effectively. Get rid of Jesus out of the church. But that's what's happening in many churches today.

Get the Bible and Jesus out. We don't want them. Not only do they want Jesus and the Bible out. But they let all sorts of crazy un-Christian things in. And it's not just denominations at home.

I was reading recently the PCUSA. A denomination in America. In their General Assembly this year. On the 22nd of June this year. They offered prayers to Allah.

[15 : 32] At a Christian General Assembly. And it shows it wasn't a Christian General Assembly at all. The word of the Lord exposes their attitude. And indifference. And then presents them with a question.

Verse 4. Is it a time for you yourselves. To dwell in your panelled houses. While this house lies in ruins. So there was building work going on after all.

But not in the house of the Lord. But on their own houses. There had been endless trips made to be in queue and home base. Each busying himself with his own house. While the Lord's house lay in ruins.

Now friends. Of course it was right for them to build houses. They needed houses for shelter. Warmth and security. And the Lord knew that. But there is a word in verse 4.

To describe their houses. Panelled. If any of you have the New Living Translation of the Bible. You'll see that verse 4 reads like this. Why are you living in luxurious houses.

[16 : 34] While my house lies in ruins. So panelled houses suggests. Real comfort. And real luxury. Their homes had been fitted out to the highest contemporary standards.

They lived in the lap of luxury. While the Lord's house. Was a building site of ruins. They were the complete opposite of King David. Who said in 2 Samuel 7 and 2.

How can I dwell in a house of luxury. While the Lord dwells in a tent. David wanted to build a house for the Lord. But instead the Lord said he would build David a dynasty.

His throne would be established forever. And we'll see more of this in chapter 2 next week. They had been charged with building the Lord's house. But instead they built their own.

They had allowed the opposition. And the hostility of the world. To change the priorities of their living. They had been conformed. To the pattern of this world. When they had first come back.

[17 : 37] They had different priorities. But now they were putting their own material well-being first. They had allowed secondary matters. To control their living. And had forgotten.

To give paramount importance. To what God required of them. They had forgotten. Because he was no longer central to their thinking. They had become the opposite of Colossians chapter 3 verse 2.

Setting their minds on earthly things. And not the things that are above. Five times throughout this short book. The people are challenged by the little phrase.

Consider your ways. Give careful thought to your ways. And friends we must do that too. Do our priorities need brought back into line with the Lord's?

Maybe you're a student. Maybe you're focused on your education. Getting through university. And getting that hard earned degree. Maybe you're saying to yourself.

[18 : 37] I'm not going to get involved in evangelism. I'm going to get through my course. And just keep my head down. I'm not interested in the Christian union.

Or anything like that. I'm just going to concentrate on my education. Or maybe your priority is your work. Spending so much time there. That you never have any time for the word.

Personally. Or with God's people. Maybe you're a parent. And yes you want your child to be a Christian. But your priorities show. That you want them to have the best education.

Be best at sports or music. And spend all sorts of time driving them here, there and everywhere to achieve this. But you never encourage them. Or insist in them attending Christian things.

That would help them to grow spiritually. Nor do you ever prioritize time for family devotions. You want them to be Christian. But your actions show.

[19 : 36] That other things are your priority. Or maybe it's your retirement. Or it's your holiday home. Or it's your family, your friends, your fitness or your finances. Maybe these things have become the priority in your life.

And not the faith. Well friends we need to take this seriously. And we need to take this personally ourselves. And make proper application for our own lives. You need to do this.

And I certainly need to do this. Not saying that these things are not important. They are. But these things can never take the place reserved in our affections. For the Lord and his glory alone.

God saw through the excuses in Haggai's day. And he sees through them today as well. First things need to be first. That's the first question in the shorter catechism, isn't it?

What is the chief end of man? The answer. To glorify God. And to enjoy him forever. Well God's word reveals they've not been living this way.

[20 : 37] He says to them in verse 5 and 7. Consider your ways. Set your heart on your ways. How is it going for you? Well this is how it's been going. Verse 6.

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. And he who earns wages does so to put them in a bag with holes.

And that's me not describing current pensions. I suppose this verse sums up our modern day pretty well. Futility.

No satisfaction. All futility. Verse 9. You looked for much and behold it came to little. And when you brought it home I blew it away. Therefore the heavens above have withheld the dew.

And the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills. On the grain, the new wine, the oil. On what the ground brings forth. On man and beast.

[21 : 38] And in all their labors. Yes there was a drought. A famine. But at least God is still speaking. There wasn't a famine of the world as there was in Amos day.

The Lord interprets their situation. Which is linked to their spiritual condition. Why? Verse 9. Because of my house that lies in ruins. And God was in keeping with his word.

He had promised them in Deuteronomy. If they honored him and obeyed him. He would bless them. But if they were faithless. He would curse them. Friends their priorities were all wrong.

They didn't have first things first. They were not seeking first the kingdom. Maybe our politicians would do well to read this chapter. Could it be conceivable that our nation is in such a mess?

Due to moral and spiritual factors? I think so. But friends maybe you're sitting and saying. Well my life's okay. So my priorities must be okay. Well sometimes our priorities are out of order.

[22 : 45] And we suffer no financial or other type of hardship. But we should never presume upon God's mercy. We should turn to him. And reorder our priorities now. Before he needs to use crisis to get through to us.

The Lord's word challenges their priorities. Well secondly verses 12 to 15. The Lord's word changes and comforts his people.

The Lord's word changes and comforts his people. Well how would the people respond to such a rebuking word from the Lord? We can see that the response was immediate.

And cut right to the heart of the people. Verse 12. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua the son of Jehoshadak the high priest. With all the remnant of the people. Obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.

And the words of Haggai the prophet. As the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. What happened? Well very simply.

[23 : 49] God's word changed them. God's word changes people. Picture just for a moment the prophet Jeremiah or the prophet Isaiah. And they're reading through Haggai.

And they both get to verse 12. And he reads. The people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God. I'm sure both of them would say. Hold on a minute. That can't even be right. You need to preach the word for years.

Before people will ever begin to listen to the Lord. I'm told one of the hardest things as a parent. Is to get your children to clean their room. I suppose I've got that to look forward to with James.

But can you imagine saying to your child. I want you to come off that computer right now. And go and tidy your room. And they say. No bother dad.

And away they go and do it immediately. It would be absolutely shocking wouldn't it? Why don't some of you children surprise your parents like that this week? But that's what happened here.

[24 : 48] God's word has challenged them. And God's word has changed them. And friends. That's why any real gospel work. Needs to be a teaching ministry. Where God's word is taught. For when God's word is taught.

The spirit of God takes the word of God. To do the work of God. God's word changes people. You know this in your own life. I know it in mine. God's word has challenged us.

And changed us. I once heard someone say that. One of the most dangerous activities. That anyone could be employed in. Was to read the Bible. Because the Bible is not a book that you read.

The Bible is a book that reads you. And it challenges you. And it changes you. So friends. Let's continue to persevere with God's word. Even in the most impossible situations.

Even with the most unlikely people. God's word changes people. The response was instant. The response was humble. And the response was united.

[25 : 47] The rebuke from the Lord. Brought about repentance. And the people who had forgotten the Lord. Now feared the Lord. Which is always the beginning of wisdom. And friends.

I think it's absolutely amazing. The grace of God. The grace of God towards half-hearted people. People who have been indifferent to him. People who have let him down. People like.

You and me. Are allowed to return. And receive his mercy. And as the people respond in repentance. The Lord comforts them with his reassuring promise.

I am with you. Bringing the promise of his presence. And his power. The rebuilding work was not going to be any different. From what it was 16 years earlier. They would face danger.

Discouragement. And opposition. It would take blood, sweat, toil and tears. So it was important. That they were united under the Lord. And his promise comforted them.

- [26 : 44] That the Lord was there to encourage them. And to strengthen them. For the work. And the evidence that God was with them. Well it's there in the next verse. Verse 14.
- And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel. Son of Shealtiel. Governor of Judah. And the spirit of Joshua. Son of Jehoshadak. The high priest. And the spirit.
- Spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came. And worked in the house of the Lord of hosts. Their God. It wasn't that they gave themselves a good shake.
- Or pulled their socks up. The Lord stirred them up. The Lord energized them. The Lord's word changed them from being people who were apathetic. Into people ready for action.
- Beginning with the leadership. And extending to all the people. The evidence that the Lord was at work in them. Was that they were now at work. God's word comes with amazing power to change.
- [27 : 43] To change those who were once indifferent to him. To change those who were apathetic towards his work. To change those who used to shrug their shoulders and say.
- I don't care. God's word challenges. And then changes them. And employs them. And empowers them in his service. Well friends.
- How can we apply this to ourselves? Well we are called to temple building too. Not a physical temple. But a spiritual one. Not by building with bricks.
- But with building with people. The apostle writes in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 19 and following. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens. But you are fellow citizens with the saints.
- And members of the household of God. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. In whom the whole structure being joined together.
- [28 : 41] Grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together. Into a dwelling place for God. By the spirit. Our God is in the construction business.
- He is gathering a people from every tribe. Tongue people and nation. And friends. He has called us as fellow laborers in that work. And just like in Haggai's day. In fact all through history.
- There has been opposition to that work. It may arise in the form of family. Friends. Public opinion. Governments. It may even arise and often does.
- From within the professing church itself. It's hard work. It takes blood, sweat, toil and tears. And if we're honest. We're often tempted to give up.
- But the Lord's word comforts with his promise. I am with you. And as God gave this promise to his Old Testament church. So the Lord Jesus Christ speaks the same promise to his New Testament church.
- [29 : 47] At the end of Matthew's gospel. Jesus gives his disciples the great commission. But he also gives them a word of great comfort. The same promise as Haggai chapter 1.
- Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father. And of the Son. And of the Holy Spirit. And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
- And surely I am with you. Always. Even to the very end of the age. Friends. Our Lord Jesus knows. That we will need this reassurance.
- His reassurance. His reassurance. He knows that sharing his gospel is hard work. And so he gives us his promise of great comfort. And friends.
- Jesus' promise has comforted and strengthened many saints all down through the ages. David Livingston. The missionary to Africa. During the 19th century.

[30 : 47] There was a time when he was back in Scotland. Back here in Glasgow. And he was at the University of Glasgow. And he was getting a degree of the Doctor of Law. And Livingston stood to address the crowd.

He was gaunt and haggard. As a result of his long exposure to the tropical sun. In nearly 30 occasions. He had been laid low by the fevers. That steamed from the inland swamps.

And these severe illnesses. Had left their mark. His left arm. That was crushed as a result of being attacked by a lion. Was hanging helplessly at his side.

And as he stood. A hush fell upon the great assembly. David Livingston announced his resolve. To return to the land for which he had already endured much.

And this is what he said. But I return without misgivings. And with great gladness. For would you like me to tell you. What supported me through all these years of exile.

[31 : 50] Years of exile amongst people whose language I couldn't understand. And whose attitude towards me was always uncertain. And often hostile. Would you like me to tell you what supported me.

Through all these things and all these years. Well it was this. Lo. I am with you always. Even unto the very end of the world.

On these words. I staked everything. And they have never failed me. And friends. We can stake everything on these words as well.

And they will never fail us. As we go. And build for the Lord. So here is Haggai chapter 1. God's word comes like an alarm clock to the church.

It's time to wake up. A word from the Lord that disturbs the comfortable. And comforts the disturbed. A message that says. Don't lose sight of your true priorities.

[32 : 50] Seek God's kingdom first. And don't forget his promise. I am with you. Always. Let us pray together. Father we come this evening as a congregation of your people.

And we can so identify with the apathy of your people in Haggai's day. Father we pray that you would take this word. And you would challenge your priorities. As you did your people of old.

And Father we pray that as your word challenges us. You might conform us to your priorities. Grant us repentance and obedience. And Father as we go to build your church.

May we remember your great promise. That you are with us. Even to the very end of the age. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.