

Seeing through the Fog

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[0 : 0 0] And they only can speak of exciting experiences, wonderful things that are happening. And we look around and think, gosh, what we have here is only hard and slow and really hard work.

Well, that's the kind of experience that Haggai is speaking to in this passage. Only Israel weren't looking around at themselves, but back in time, back to the good old days.

And so we'll look at this passage in three parts. First, the problem. Verses 1 to 3, there's progress that is faltering. And then two encouragements. Verses 4 to 5, God is persistently faithful.

And then verses 6 to 9, we have a glorious promise for the future. So first, the problem. Verses 1 to 3, progress is faltering.

In the midst of faithfully serving God and his gospel, it is not a unique experience to have discouragement. When you look at the state of the world and the church, that was certainly the experience that the remnant had here.

[1 : 1 0] And many of us will know a feeling that is something similar. Look at verse 3. God's word through his prophet asks three questions. Question 1, who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory?

Now, there may have been some who were around 60-odd years previously, when Solomon's great temple was still around, and was at the heart of the life of a flourishing and glorious kingdom.

But question 2, how do you see it now? Notice that it isn't a new temple that they're building, but they're restoring the old one.

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

The implied answer is yes. It's like nothing. It's underwhelming, discouraging even. Progress is slow. They've started again. But the feeling must surely have been that the temple was never going to be as glorious as it once was.

[2 : 1 8] God acknowledges the feeling amongst his people. He sees what's going on. And actually, that feeling would have been even more tangible at the time of year that Haggai is speaking. Look at verse 1.

This prophecy is spoken on the 21st day of the seventh month, which is at the climax of the festival of booths or tabernacles. We can read about that in Leviticus 23.

But it was a festival that lasted seven days and meant staying in tents for that time. And it was a celebration to mark God's bringing Israel out of Egypt and anticipating the promised land.

It was to remember how God had displayed his incredible faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham. And it was a time when Israel could look forward to the promised land.

They had the anticipation of the great kingdom of Israel ahead. But now, that kingdom's behind them. Exile has dismantled it.

[3 : 18] Haggai's day felt much more like a day of rubble and hardship than a day of rescue and hope. The date is important, too, because it was at the same time of year that Solomon's great temple was dedicated.

By now, Israel has begun to do the work that God commanded in chapter 1 from last week. But it just didn't seem like it was going to go anywhere or achieve anything.

It seemed like it was only going to be disappointment compared to the temple of days gone by. The prominent shadow of Solomon's temple lingered over them. Was this restoration really going to achieve anything?

Even when the temple would be completed, setting aside that it wouldn't be as grand as before, would it even be significant? Under Solomon, it was at the heart of life, under a thriving and glorious kingdom.

But now, it could just be a bit of politicking by some foreign rulers, Cyrus and Darius. Of course, since Solomon, there hasn't just been its physical destruction, but also, as Ezekiel depicts it, God's glory has departed.

[4 : 33] Verse 3, Well, that former glory is gone. That's the experience of life in the supposedly restored Israel.

Do we know that feeling? Long gone are the days of great rallies where on a Saturday night, churches would be packed out as preachers invite hundreds to respond to Jesus, or Billy Graham can fill thousands in a stadium, and they respond to the call of the gospel.

Or perhaps it's just in looking back at student days and yearning for the excitement of being part of a CU, surrounded by Christians all the time, engaged in evangelism easily.

But now, it's a hard slog. Work life is busy. It's a struggle to get to the prayer meeting with all the pressures you've got at home. Never mind getting to church and serving.

And now, too, as well, Christendom is long gone. Reports are everywhere of the church in the West in decline, where once the church had a voice in society, and even an important one, now it just seems like we're the crazies who haven't progressed with the civilized.

[5 : 46] Keep them quiet. Keep them out of sight. Or maybe you've just been faithfully making relationships to share Jesus with your colleagues, with your neighbors, with your friends, but it just doesn't seem to work.

Is relying on the Bible really going to be that much of an impact in this world? Does the world even take the church seriously? We live in a world that wants instant results.

We love faster internet, quicker computers, phones that can do everything for us just by looking at them. And so it can feel like the plodding, faithful Christian life that perseveres when life is really hard, that keeps doing the basics of investing the gospel in people, just seems disappointing.

It's so slow. It's so slow that it can't be worth it. Well, God's word to his people is not to sharply rebuke them, but to strongly reassure them.

He understands that we can feel like this. So where we look around at our Christian life and at our church and the ministries we're involved in and all we can see is rubble, Haggai has two encouragements to give us.

[7 : 04] First, verses four to five, he tells us that God is persistently faithful. God is persistently faithful. When we are discouraged, we must look back and remember what God has done in rescuing his people and how he dwells with them as he's promised.

Israel's concerns aren't brushed off, but what Haggai brings to the people is God's reassurance. He says, verse four, be strong, be strong, be strong, all the remnant.

And then he says, work for I'm with you. God doesn't say forget about the task, but he says that whilst you press on with doing it, I am with you.

So whilst there's work to do, whilst they're faithfully getting on with what God had given them to do, God reassures them that I am here with you, strengthening you for the task.

Just as he, verse five, had promised, covenanted to do. Israel had hit their nadir in the exile. God's presence had left his temple.

[8 : 15] He'd ceased to speak to his people. But God is with them as much as he was with the Joshua of the days of the conquest. Notice the repeat of the familiar words from Joshua chapter one, here in verse four, be strong, be strong.

The message is the same to this generation. Be strong for the Lord, your God is with you. Just as God was with the Israelites when they conquered the promised land, so God is with the restoration community who are retaking it.

And also verse five, God is with them as much as he was with Israel and Moses at Sinai. The greatest tragedy for Israel would be God removing himself from them.

This is what Moses said in Exodus chapter 33. If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people?

Is it not in your going with us so that we're distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth? God is assuring his people that now in the restoration, he's with them.

[9 : 30] They are distinct. He hasn't abandoned them. Things might look bleak. Things might look like they're feeling. Things might look underwhelming. But God is present with his people and he's committed to fulfilling his promises.

The temple mightn't be completed, but I am with you. So work and fear not, even if the surrounding nations are lingering to thwart you.

God says, do what you can do. When rubble is all that you can see, keep working, because I am strengthening you. I am actively fulfilling my promises, my purposes.

So every day that we keep pressing on in faithfulness to God, even when it seems fruitless, is a testimony to God's word at work in us. And so as we keep on doing it, we have the knowledge that we share the same promises and the same heritage that spans all the way back to the Exodus, through the conquest, and beyond even the restoration.

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

[10 : 51] And as he has acted in history already to redeem his people and build his kingdom, he will surely continue to do so. So they and we may not have a Solomon or a Moses or even a physical temple, but God has promised his presence with us.

And we can be more sure of this. And so, of course, we want to be temple builders. We want to be engaged in the extension of God's kingdom to the world.

Our part in that doesn't look particularly spectacular. We as a church commit together to telling the victory that Christ has won. That's building for us.

And it's God who ultimately then builds his kingdom. But the unspectacular looking work is transformed to be world changing as God's spirit causes it to bear fruit.

work because your work isn't futile. It has God's stamp all over it. Whilst we work, God says, my spirit is in your midst.

[12 : 01] The difficulty of the work isn't denied. The possibility of being discouraged is real. But perhaps when we're feeling like we're fighting a losing battle and everything looks to be covered in fog, perhaps our perspective needs to be readjusted.

When the media attacks all that's true and right and pushes its progressive ideologies, we can feel very weak indeed. Hushed, written off, do we need to rethink things?

Has God's word become out of date? By no means. God's kingdom wasn't thwarted by the superpowers of days gone by. Egypt and all its magicians and chariots were no match.

Canaan with its might was no match. God is committed to his work. He's behind it. He's got a rich history of showing and proving that. And as his people do his work, we can have confidence that he will achieve all that he's committed to do.

And so that's an encouragement from looking back. But Haggai goes on to point us forward for the second encouragement. Verses 6 to 9. And the glorious promised future that we have.

[13 : 20] We keep going with our work now because we knew that in the end God undertakes to bring about the ultimate fulfillment of all that he's promised.

And it will be more glorious than ever before. Our work is strengthened by the fact that God has a clear picture of what will be built in the end.

That picture is verse 9. That the latter temple will be more glorious than the former. Solomon's temple will be eclipsed. So in this setting where they're discouraged and to have people who've endured curses that mean they've had poor harvest and shortages of money, look at what God says.

Verse 7. He will shake the nations and their treasures will pour into the temple. God says he will see to it that the temple has all that's needed.

And of course this has happened to a certain extent through King Darius and his empire as we read in Ezra. It's King Darius who's essentially footing the bill for this rebuilding project.

[14 : 33] And then later on in Herod's day we see something similar as the temple's brought to some physical grandeur again. God says, verse 8, don't worry about the material needs of the work.

He will provide them because the silver is his and the gold is his. all the gold and all the silver belongs to God.

But beyond providing the material, things that were lacking for the temple, God is promising to do much more than that here. The greatest tragedy in the temple's history was when God's glory withdrew from it.

And so he says, verse 7, I will fill this house with glory, not just of riches of gold and silver, but with a glory that means it will be, verse 9, greater than it's ever been before.

As we saw already, this prophecy came during the Feast of Booths, a feast that was instituted whilst Israel were still in the wilderness, but it was also given for when they reached the promised land.

[15 : 39] When the feast was first celebrated, it would have brought a sense of longing for the land, but when they arrived in Canaan, they would have needed to be reminded that even Canaan wasn't the end goal.

It wasn't their final home. And so in the midst of prosperity in the land, it would have been a reminder that there was a better city waiting for them. There was a new Jerusalem and store and God says, verse 6, in a little while he will intervene and establish his kingdom throughout the world.

He will bring about greater glory in the temple. He will bring his greater city. He will bring into reality the final hope of his people. So whilst there was a yearning of past glories amongst the remnant, God's been clear.

He's saying, keep doing the work of building the temple. Even when our work looks slow and unglamorous, even when the work of planting the gospel in people's lives doesn't look like it's building the kingdom, work, keep going.

Evangelism, Bible study, training people for ministry, they hardly look like they're going to ripple around the world with significance. We might think it could be more tangible to save the environment or try to, to make a real difference material in people's lives in the present.

[17 : 03] Of course, they're not bad things to do. But we mustn't stop the work that we've been given to do as a church. Just like the Israelites shouldn't have stopped the work of the temple.

For it is in ministering God's word as a church that we are investing in a kingdom that won't be shaken or burnt away. As we do the work of clearing the rubble, of standing for the truth, of continuing to live lives that honor God and bring people into his kingdom, God will ensure the progress of his kingdom.

It's he who builds it. We must remember that when things look fruitless and hopeless even, God has promised a glorious conclusion to world history. And it's one that he himself guarantees.

Look at the constant action words used of God in these verses. God says, verse 6, I will shake. Verse 7, I will shake and I will fill.

And verse 9, I will give. God promised to shake the world so that everything would be turned upside down. For now, the world around might look like it's winning whilst the church looks like it's in retreat.

[18 : 23] but the story isn't over. When Christ was crucified and the temple curtain tore, the earth was shaken. There was an earthquake. As Jesus was raised from the tomb and the stone was rolled away, the earth was shaken.

God promised to shake the world and turn it upside down. God promised to build a kingdom that will be unshakable. That's what the writer of Hebrews tells us.

And when Christ came and when he died and when he rose and there was a great shaking, we see that he is the true temple. And so now we can be more sure of all of this.

We can be more sure of the wonderful promise of the future. And so as we work, as we herald Christ's victory, as we pour our lives into building with living stones, God guarantees the ultimate and final establishment of his kingdom that will, verse 9, bring peace, that will bring the perfection of how things were in the garden, only now established throughout the whole earth as it becomes his temple.

Peace everywhere as God's kingdom will extend to every corner of the earth. That's the future for us. That's the future for this world.

[19 : 45] And so each piece of rubble cleared, each brick laid was investing in the future that Christ has sealed and he will bring it into full realization at his return.

Just as every piece of faithful service now that shows God's word at work in our hearts is also investing in that same future. Our work is not in vain.

God will ensure that his kingdom stands gloriously and unshakably in the end and not even the gates of hell will stand a chance against it.

So as we look around and see discouragement, as we see the fog, as it clouds everything, Haggai has given us two things to be encouraged by and ultimately we can see that the hope for the future, this glorious shaking and making an unshakable kingdom will help us navigate through that fog.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you for the Lord Jesus that in his coming and dying and rising, he has altered the course of history and that he has brought about the beginning of his wonderful kingdom.

[21 : 20] So help us to see it. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on that as we work for you now. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.