

The God of New Beginnings and Restoration

The Prophet Haggai's Four Messages

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of a talk given by David Gooding at the 50th Anniversary of Panton Gospel Hall in Cambridge, England in February 1994.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast

BT1 9YR

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: hag.001/bh/jf

Haggai

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Introduction

Haggai was an important prophet—the first of the three that we meet at the end of the Old Testament who were prophets of the return. They ministered under the Lord to Israel when she came back from exile. Although Haggai was an important prophet, he has left us only four messages; and doubtless what we have here in writing are the summaries of what he said in rebuke and encouragement to God’s people. However long it took him to deliver, we have here the inspired record of the summaries of his four main messages. Each of them is dated in their first verses, and the last one is the shortest of the four.

He delivered these messages within a very short space of time. The first one came ‘in the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month’ (1:1), and the last one of them came that same year, ‘on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius’ (2:10, 20). The third one also came on that day. So they all came within four months. In that period Haggai had ministered so effectively by the Spirit of God that the work of the building of the temple, which had completely stopped when he began his ministry, was revived and carried on until it was finished.

Contents of Haggai

It is very interesting to see that, of the four messages, the first one is a rebuke for having left the work of restoration unfinished and settling down in ease. It was a rebuke that went home to the hearts of God’s people, so that within a matter of a week or two they had got back to the work, rolling their sleeves up once more, bending their backs and carrying on God’s work. It was a very effective rebuke. The three other messages were words of encouragement. No one knew better than Haggai that when the people came back, stung in their consciences and beginning to get on again with the work of rebuilding life, the going would be hard, and it was encouragement above all else that they would need.

Let us remember this too. It is very easy to give words of criticism that may well be deserved. It is comparatively easy to rebuke one another for our dreadful shortcomings and for not doing things as we ought to; we do deserve such rebukes at times. But if we are rebuked too much we shall lose heart altogether and go home with our legs weakened and faces dropped, saying that we never were much good anyway. We have done our best but it has all gone wrong. So why bother again? Let us rebuke one another if we have to; and we have to, we may be sure. But let us remember to give three courses of encouragement for

every one of rebuke. That is what we shall need to go on again. We need it on Sundays, and we shall need it on Mondays and next week and next month again, if we are not to become totally discouraged. That is how to promote God's work of restoration—give one faithful word of rebuke and then three of encouragement! In this we shall be following Haggai's example.

1:1-15	his first message—of rebuke
2:1-9	his second message—of encouragement
2:10-19	his third message—of encouragement
2:20-23	his fourth message—of encouragement

A message of rebuke—chiding (1:1-15)

What was the situation that called for the rebuke? To learn the history of it we shall have to read in Ezra, particularly at the end of chapter four and the beginning of chapter five. We are told there what Haggai and Zechariah did, and why (see 5:1). In those chapters we learn that the Israelites had come back under Ezra, Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. They had started to build again the temple of the Lord, and they had been given certain materials and money by the Gentile emperor to help them set about it.

The very real challenges they faced

When the Jews thus returned to the land and started to rebuild their temple, all the little nations around them began complaining, because they were very fearful. What was going to happen now with these Jews coming back and taking the land? Presently they would be establishing themselves as a strong power and maybe drive them out. Their economic interests and their territorial interests would be in danger, so they began appealing to the United Nations (well, the imperial power anyway) to get Israel stopped. And at the beginning their efforts succeeded. His imperial majesty wrote and commanded that the rebuilding of the temple was to stop. It did stop. The sheer difficulty of carrying on, with all the nations around being against Israel and plotting in the imperial palace against them, and the emperor's edict forbidding them, forced them to stop.

Then there was another difficulty: economics. Times were hard. The harvests did not yield much in the little smallholdings they had. There was not much money, and you cannot even build a new hall, not to mention a new temple, without money. They thought it was not possible in those difficult economic times of unemployment and small wage packets, and with the difficult political conditions of the government against them, so they stopped. And as we think about this we could easily say that it was very reasonable for them to think that way.

What would we say if we were in Russia, and the government said that we must not carry on? If we talked about Christ, our children may mention it to their schoolteachers. They may report it to the government, and we could find ourselves in Siberia. If we got baptized we may look out! How can evangelism be attempted in conditions like that? For a moment we could think that the reasons were good and solid. But God does not look at it like this, or at

least he did not in Haggai's day. And we have learned that our good brethren in Russia and such places do not look at it like that either. Some of them cannot make out what we are doing in the West, since their meetings are crammed to the doors and the work of the Lord is going ahead with multitudes getting saved.

God's response to the challenges

How did God look at it? Haggai came to the people saying, "'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?" (1:2-4). We must not make too sweeping judgments in this connection, but it is always a little bit doubtful if we find it is all right to get ahead with setting up our homes, improving them and making them good, and simultaneously saying it is not the time for the Lord's work. It is time to raise a big question mark when that happens. Can we get on with our own things, homes and careers, and not with the Lord's work? If so, God will call to us through Haggai to question the whole business. The likelihood is that we are deceiving ourselves, and we could be getting on with the Lord's work. We are hiding behind circumstances, and if we were prepared for the cost there would be a way forward to get on with his work.

'Just look at all those difficulties,' says Haggai. 'I have a suggestion to make to you, and I make it in the name of the Lord. Could it be that God has been allowing the economic things to be difficult on purpose? You have lost interest in God's things, and he has decided to cut the economics short for you. But now God says that if you begin to put his things first he will be prepared to bless you, even economically' (1:5-11).

And here again we have to be careful how we apply this. It does not mean that every believer who is finding his pay packet thin, or is unemployed, or has not got much money, or cannot find a job is under God's displeasure. Of course not! It can be the very reverse of that. It may be that God has called such to suffer, and to glorify his name by their patience and submission to what is a trial of faith (1 Pet 1:6-9). Such believers are often more spiritual than others. There were days when the miners' wives in the North East of England had to get down on their knees and ask God for the next loaf of bread. Now they have all that they need to eat, but if you asked them they would say that they were more spiritual than they are now.

So we do have to be careful how we apply the lesson. Yet there is a broad principle here and it runs like this: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31). If we put God first he guarantees us enough, and he guarantees that he will see us through.

The need to get on with the work

The first message is that we are not to hide behind political circumstances or difficult economic conditions as excuses for stopping work for God. We are to say that God has commanded us to go on; and if we go on for him he is prepared to see that we have enough means. So Haggai rebuked his contemporaries.

We read here a lovely thing about Zerubbabel, who was a governor, a prince; and Joshua who was the high priest; and many of the other people too (1:12–15). They did not get up on their high horses and challenge Haggai, as if he had no right to say such things to them and he did not really know their circumstances. No, they listened to the message and recognised it was from the Lord, and they looked beyond him and heard the voice of the Lord. If we look only at the preacher it will put our backs up and we will accuse him of not knowing our circumstances. But the Lord does!

Then, as Haggai concluded his first message, he said that they were to get on with the work of rebuilding the house of the Lord of Hosts. No matter what the political and economic conditions were like the promise remained: 'I am with you, declares the LORD' (1:13). The difficulties will recede. There comes an echo of this from the New Testament, as the risen Lord stood on the Mount of Olives and said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:18–20)

That was Haggai's first message. The other three were messages of encouragement. Let us summarise them and encourage each other to read and study all the details.

The first encouragement (2:1–9)

What was the first encouragement to the people as they got to the work? It came like this: '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 . . .' (2:3–4). Behind these lines we can see why the dear folks needed encouragement. They had come back to build. The first thing that strikes people who come to build like that is, when they have been at it for half a morning, they realise it is going to be a bigger job than they thought; and even if they finish it, it is not going to be anything like what it was before.

There were a few, possibly only a few, old grey heads there of ninety years or so, who remembered what the temple was like before it was destroyed. It was a magnificent temple, built by Solomon and maintained by the Jewish kings for centuries with all the wealth of the royal house at their disposal. When these people began to work on the ruins—patching up here and there, making amends here and there—they felt that it would never be anything like what it used to be in the former days. Would it be worth it? When they had done their best it would still not be very wonderful.

Have you ever heard anyone talking like that? Perhaps we have been about to go out with tracts and some folk have said that they did that years ago; but in those days there were able men about, and thirty of them used to go out together and achieve something. But now there are only a few doing it and nothing much will be achieved. The trouble with that kind of talk is whether it is true. But if they did have glorious days together, why did they not keep them going? It would have been great to be around when Moody was going about, and Spurgeon too, and people were getting saved by the dozen. But we were not around then! We are living

today. Although what we do will only be a little thing, and a shadow of what they did, let us not discourage one another from doing it.

God would see through a bigger plan

God told them that he knew it was not anything like what Solomon's temple was. He was realistic enough to see that. He knew these were different times. But he also told them that if they would work with him and be strong then (feeble and small though it was) he would be with them:

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, 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. 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. (2:4-6)

God would soon get the half-crowns out of the pockets of a few millionaires to help on the work; and all the desirable things of the nations would come. The latter glory of the house would be greater than the former. How was that possible? God was not looking at that little house just then, which was a very poor thing. He was seeing the results of it down through the centuries. It would be added to. It would be replaced by Herod's temple, and to that temple God incarnate would come. It too would be destroyed; and looking on to the future it would finally be rebuilt again, and the Lord would come the second time. So, what they were doing then was part of the process that would lead to the final glory. And that was what God told them through Haggai.

It does not matter what it is we are doing for the Lord with an honest heart and as best we can. Even though it is much less than what used to be done, it is still part of the great and eternal thing: the glory of which will outshine everything there has ever been.

The second encouragement (2:10-19)

Haggai's second message of encouragement is also set against a difficult and discouraging thing. In chapter two, Haggai, in God's name, takes an object lesson:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Ask the priests about the law: 'If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy?' The priests answered and said, 'No.' Then Haggai said, 'If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?' The priests answered and said, 'It does become unclean.' (2:11-13)

He asks the priests about certain technical rules and regulations regarding cleanness and uncleanness. The illustration sounds very odd to us in our day. In those days, when the priest took holy meat from the altar, he would be wearing his big robes. If the priest came in contact with anything then the question was, did the holiness of the meat communicate itself to

anything it touched? The answer is, no. But if something or somebody unclean touched this garment where the meat was, did the priest become unclean? The answer is, yes.¹

So things are not equal. The meat in the man's robes, if it touched something, did not make that unclean thing clean—the holiness did not communicate itself. But if an unclean thing touched the holy thing it defiled that whole thing. Is that fair? Well, no; but then this world is not fair. We may wish that we could catch holiness by infection, or by contagion. That would be marvellous. Imagine folks getting saved by infection or contagion! Imagine a Christian walking past someone on the factory floor, touching him, and he gets saved. But things are not like that, and the opposite is more likely to happen. A Christian walking through the factory floor, and hearing something unclean, will be defiled by the very contact with it. To put it in other words: sin spreads much more easily than holiness does.

Why try at all then? We live in very wicked and evil times; the world has gone rotten with immorality. What is the good of struggling on when even the people of God get defiled and compromised by all sorts of means and methods much more now than in days gone by? Is it any good to struggle against that, and to struggle against sin? We cannot expect the Lord to bless us if we are not holy, that is true! Or, is it?

This much of it is true—we must seek to be clean vessels, 'set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work' (2 Tim 2:21). Every one of us ought to be concerned to purge ourselves from all evil so that we may be vessels fit for the Master's use. We need not suppose that if we are going to live careless lives, all mixed up in the filth and nonsense of this world, we shall be fit for the Lord's use in his holy service.

But let us be careful what deduction we make from this. We must never tell someone that he had better pack up trying to serve the Lord, and wait until he is one hundred percent right with the Lord. If we ask anyone to wait for that, he shall never start! No one shall ever be totally clean from all the stupid pride, arrogance and nonsense that we get up to. God is saying here that uncleanness spreads more easily than holiness.

God's promise to bless

In this second message of encouragement, God was saying that all Israel were like that (2:14). They were all unclean and defiled, 'but from this day on I will bless you,' said God (2:18–19). If they would put their backs to his work, although they were unworthy and unclean, if they would pray his mercy on them to be cleaner every day and do his work as best they could, he would bless them from that day.

And it is the fact that, from the day the apostles began their work, every bit of work done by God has been done through imperfect servants. Yet that is no licence for us to take uncleanness lightly. We must be realists, like Isaiah was when he was in the presence of God, and saw him high and lifted up. He realised then that he was unclean and was from that day commissioned to go and serve the Lord and speak his word (Isa 6:1–13). That is the reality of the matter. If we wait until we are perfectly holy before we speak to the next-door neighbour about Christ, we will never speak to her. We must start now, even if we were not very

¹ The principle here is illuminated by passages in the Pentateuch, such as Lev 6:18; 7:19; 11:24–28, 39–40; 21:1, 11; 22:4–6; Num 5:2; 6:6; 19:11–13.

pleasant to her yesterday. Go and apologise about that and tell her that you do not find apologising easy, but you are a Christian and Christ does not come personally to tell her, so you have to do it! That would be a start. If from this day, in spite of all weakness, you start, God says, 'I will bless you.'

The third encouragement (2:20–23)

Finally, in Haggai's third encouragement there was a personal word for Zerubbabel. It was just for him. It was not even for Joshua the high priest or for anyone else. He was the political man. He was the leader of the nation who had to meet head-on all the opposition of the emperor and the other little nations around. There must have been times when Zerubbabel would have looked at the simple believers, working away at their temple knowing so little of what was going on in the council chambers of the emperor. But he knew how the wires were being pulled; he expected that the next day they would get a notice by His Majesty's Imperial Post telling them to stop! Was it not almost crazy to try going on, with all that political power around them and basically against them? The simple working brethren did not know about it all—they did not move in those circles. But Zerubbabel did, and he must have wondered how they could ever possibly succeed with all the massed might of the complicated wire pulling behind the scenes in political circles. How would they ever get through?

Then there came this word to Zerubbabel:

I am about to shake the heavens and the earth . . . overthrow the throne of kingdoms . . . destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations . . . the chariots and their riders . . . On that day . . . I will take you . . . and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the LORD of hosts. (2:21–24)

The promise was marvellous, and at that one little level it was fulfilled in Zerubbabel. God stopped the opposition, and Zerubbabel started and finished the building of the temple (Ezra 6:13–18). But in a bigger sense it will be fulfilled in him of whom Zerubbabel was only a type—Jesus Christ our Lord. He said that all things were given him of his Father and all authority in heaven and earth was his (Matt 11:27; 28:18). On this rock he would build his church and the gates of hell should not prevail against it (Matt 16:18).

The imprint of God's character

So Zerubbabel carried on, and we should too. God said to Zerubbabel here that on that day he would make him like the signet ring on his finger (2:23). In those days it was the fashion for a person to have a large ring with a stone set into it on one of his fingers. (The fashion seems to be recurring today, for they are evident on gentlemen a bit more than they used to be.) On the stone was the emblem of the person wearing it—perhaps his initials or something else. When he wanted to sign something he would get wax and squeeze the signet ring down on to it. That was his signature. The ring also looked good on his finger, adding to the dress of the person and showing off his personality to good effect.

Did we realise that God wears signet rings? He does; and we know the name of one of them: Zerubbabel! God promised to make him as a signet ring, to stamp his initials on earth.

God was going to have his temple built and stamp his impression on this world—and he was going to use Zerubbabel to do it. So when God would sign his documents he would sign them with his signet ring, expressing his authority. Thus the character and authority of God were impressed on this world through Zerubbabel. Today we know the name of Zerubbabel and that he built a temple. What did his contemporary Gentile kings do? What were their names? The world has forgotten them, but God used Zerubbabel to stamp his impression on this world.

It was a prophecy, of course, of the one who is greater than Zerubbabel. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the very stamp of God's nature: 'He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1:3). In Jesus Christ God stamped his very character and authority on our world, and he will do it again. What a wonder it will be to see the final thing fulfilled!

What about us? Would we like to be signet rings on God's fingers, so that he could stamp his character and authority on wherever we live? It could happen! Despite all the show that wicked men make and the powers of politics combined, believers can be signet rings on God's hand by which he stamps his mark on men and women on earth and saves them, thus stamping his testimony to Christ in a district. For his name's sake he does it as a testimony to what he is doing and shall yet do before and on that final day.

A final thought

Let us consider one final matter from this prophecy. Haggai is quoted in the New Testament. (It is a basic principle when we are studying the Old Testament to see how the New Testament applies it.) Twice in Haggai God says that he will shake the heavens and the earth (2:6, 21). In 2:6 he says, 'Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth . . .'. He shook it once, when Israel stood before Mount Sinai and he began his work with them in the days of the wilderness (Exod 19:18; Judg 5:5; Ps 68:8). They built the tabernacle then. Yet once again he would shake it, and men would bring the great resources of the nations and build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. But many years later the writer to the Hebrews was thinking about this passage:

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' This phrase, 'Yet once more', indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. (12:26–27)

Do you know what that implies? Everything that is perishable and impermanent shall disappear, and only what is eternal shall survive. Oh that we grasped this! One of these days there is coming a very big shaking of heaven and earth, and all that is unworthy and perishable shall disappear.

Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.²

² From a poem by C. T. Studd.

'Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire' (12:28–29). He accepts no excuses!

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.