

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of HAGGAI

The last three books of the Old Testament, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, belong to the post-exilic era of Israel's history. Of the three, only Malachi has been previously covered in our Bible Notes (Sept 1974); with the other two we break new ground.

The historical background of both Haggai and Zechariah is supplied by the book of Ezra (Bible Notes of which were printed in May/June 1975; and a more recent study has just been published by Didasko Press under the title 'A Time to Build'). The ministry of both prophets played a significant part in the ongoing work of rebuilding, as we shall see.

It will be seen from the first verse of Haggai (as also in 2:1, 2:10, 2:20) that the prophecy is very precisely dated. Four times, within the space of a few months, the word of the Lord is said to have come to the prophet. It is therefore strictly localised, and from the time point of view speaks to one particular situation. The situation is as follows: The exiles returned from Babylon in 538 BC and began the rebuilding of the Temple. When opposition arose from the enemies of God's people, they became discouraged and the work of rebuilding came to a standstill (Ezra 4:24). It was then that God raised up Haggai and Zechariah to stir His people into action once more. How this was done is the subject matter of the prophecy before us now.

1) 1:1

When we studied the relevant passages in Ezra, what we said was this: If the cessation of the work of rebuilding the Temple was not due to anything wrong in the people of God - after all, it was the opposition of the enemy rather than any carelessness on their part - it is certainly true to say that this situation led to something becoming wrong. And what did become wrong was this: the people of God became complacent. And God sent the two prophets to stir them out of their complacency. Consider, then, the situation. The exiles had returned with great expectations, with a great sense of purpose. They had had the wonderful promises of Isaiah 40-66 to encourage them in the hope that God would do a new thing. But now they had run into stiff and unrelenting opposition, and they found the going terribly hard. Presently the opposition moved so effectively that they 'queered their pitch' with the emperor, and the whole work of reconstruction was ceased. The discouragement and disheartening can be readily imagined. But discouragement is one thing, falling into a spirit of complacency is quite another. And it is clear from the record that fifteen years elapsed in which there was no real attempt to restart the work. This is the sort of situation which is fruitful in lessons for the spiritual life. A spirit of discouragement can certainly make a man say 'Oh what's the use?'; and when he says that, he is not very far from the place of indifference and complacency. That is the danger-point; and we may understand from this something of the urgency with which Haggai addressed the people in his prophecy.

2) 1:1-4

Here, then, was the inactivity of the people. The Temple was lying waste, and the people were neglecting it. The Lord's complaint against them was that they were concentrating on establishing themselves in the place and had got themselves into the position of having forgotten all about the purpose for which they had returned from exile. In itself, there is little wrong about settling down and building one's own house, but when it becomes a substitute for what we are supposed to be doing - this is where the trouble starts, whether in Israel or in our modern world. What the prophet is challenging the people about is the matter of their priorities in spiritual life, and that is one of the relevant passages of the prophecy for today. They had fallen into the predicament for which the pre-exilic prophet Amos had condemned their fathers when he cried 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion'. Circumstances had combined to make them preoccupied with the cultivation of their own comfort, and forget that they had not been brought back from exile for comfort but for conflict and hard work. They should not have been in any doubt about this. They had been reinstated in God's sovereign purposes, and this was grace indeed, and benediction enough, without the question of comfort coming into it at all. In the same way it can often become important to believers to cultivate their (home) comforts to the neglect of God's real purposes for their lives in fighting the battles of the Spirit. But God's work often demands and requires the sacrifice of home comforts; and if priorities are not sorted out and kept clear and unquestioned, home and family interests and enjoyments can displace and jeopardise the work of God. This is the issue that is spelt out for us in these challenging verses.

3) 1:5-11

The prophet therefore summons the people to consider their ways, to look at their situation, and begin to put two and two together in relation to what had been happening to them. Their harvests had failed, their economy was not only stagnant, but precarious in the extreme, and inflation was rampant ('a bag with holes' - a graphic and up-to-date metaphor, indeed!). This is perhaps the classical expression of the doctrine that economic stringency and crisis can have a moral and spiritual cause and root. One of the saddest and most disquieting aspects of our own public life today is that there is so very little awareness in those who bear rule over us (so far as we can judge from their public utterances) that our problems might conceivably have any underlying moral and spiritual factors. But they have; and it is only spiritual obtuseness and insensitiveness that makes men blind to them. This is why it is so important to have a biblical view of life. When we have, we will recognise that it is not safe to pin our national hopes even on such an incredibly rich resource as North Sea oil, for God can turn that to nought also, as 11 makes clear. This is why it is the moral and spiritual integrity of a government, not its colour, that will ultimately tell in the welfare of a nation.

4) 1:12-15

In 12 we see that there was one national leader that 'got the message'. The date in 15 indicates that in the space of little more than three short weeks a complete transformation took place. The message of the prophets was heeded and obeyed, not only by the leaders, but by the people themselves, and the work of rebuilding was begun once again. This is a measure of the power of the word of the Lord in the situation, and underlines the desperate need in our own time for an authentic and authoritative word to be spoken by the Church to our day and generation. The tragedy is that the Church is so preoccupied with the dread asbestos of 'other things' that there is little prospect of any fire kindling. The present crisis that faces our own denomination at this time can have a good deal of light thrown on it by these verses, for they bear witness to the fact that it is obedience to the word of the Lord, when He summons us to consider our ways, that brings back His presence into the midst. If this book has anything to say to us today, it is that there is nothing in our present parlous situation that a living God in the midst cannot deal with, and sort out. The message is: Wanted - a people prepared to obey God. When He has that, He has a bridgehead in the world.

5) 1:12-15

Such, then, is the first prophecy of Haggai. The people had come back with high hopes of rebuilding the Temple, but had found that the work of restoring the lost glories of the land is never an easy one, and that only those who are prepared to face much opposition and discouragement and continue steadfastly in the face of it will win through. We have often, alas, far too sentimental ideas about the work of God, and imagine that it can be accomplished on the crest of a wave of enthusiasm. But this is not realistic: God's work has never been done that way. When we read of great manifestations of spiritual power, we tend to forget the blood and toil and tears and sweat that are their necessary and inevitable antecedents. We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God! That is the first great lesson here; and the second is that we must be prepared to put first things first in our lives and in our homes and in our families. This is where the account is rendered and where it has to be paid. But when it is, there comes this glad assurance, 'I am with you, saith the Lord'. In the last analysis, this is the only thing that matters. It is worth paying any price for that!

6) 2:1-9

Haggai's second prophecy is recorded in these verses. It was given some twenty-seven days after the recommencement of the work (1:15), and is clearly a word of exhortation and encouragement. Our understanding of it must be something like this: At the end of chapter 1 we see the people of God resuming the work of rebuilding the Temple with a new spirit of enthusiasm and dedication. But it could be readily understood that for at least some of them, this might have been a fairly marginal experience, with not very much reserve of inspiration. And to work on a slight and slender margin for twenty-seven days can be fairly testing. In such circumstances it is very easy for discouragements to be allowed to loom up in the background of the mind. There were some, it would seem - and this seems to be how we should interpret 2 and 3 - who, looking at the rebuilding, were casting their minds back to the glories and magnificence of the former Temple, and were comparing the new, very modest building before them very unfavourably with that of the past. And their spirits began to go down once more. It was in this context that the prophet gave a new word of encouragement from the Lord. This is something that raises a very major issue, and we have much to learn from it, as the following Notes will show.

7) 2:1-9

Over against the discouragement that the exiles were now experiencing, Haggai said several things. First of all there was the assurance of the Divine Presence with them: 'I am with you', and 'My Spirit remaineth among you', saith the Lord. If this is true, there is never any ground for discouragement, for His presence presupposes His sovereignty at work; and therefore it is really beside the point whether or not what is now being done matches up to the past. It is what God wants to do that is important; we cannot be more useful to Him than He chooses to make us. We should be content with His plans for us, whatever they are, and however modest they may seem, in comparison with other times. Then, in the second place, God gave them the assurance through the prophet that the glory of the latter house would be greater than that of the former. 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. In the past, it was the material glory of the Temple that gave it its magnificence. But God had said that He would do a new thing. What He was out to do was to build not so much a Temple as a people, out of whom was to come the promise of the ages and the desire of all nations. The real fulfilment of this word in 9 is seen in the Acts of the Apostles. It is there that we see 'the glory that excelleth', and realise that the glory of God's latter house is not only greater, but incomparably greater, than of the former.

8) 2:1-9

Haggai's message has a good deal to teach us today; what do we have in mind when we think of the glory of God's house? Do we, as those in the prophet's day did, tend to look back to 'the good old days', with the wistful longing that these might return again? This may or may not be realistic, dependent on the way we are thinking of it. Insofar as we are thinking of the visitations of God's Spirit in our past history, we are surely right to long for such times of refreshing to come upon the Church; but it is also possible to look on the past with rose-coloured spectacles, and not only confuse the glory with its incidental trappings, but also identify it with the particular pattern in which it expressed itself, thus assuming that unless it takes that form in our own time, it is not the authentic work of the Spirit. The poet is right: 'God fulfils Himself in many ways, lest one good custom should corrupt the world'. God's pattern in the past may not at all be His pattern for today; and the danger is lest we should be so preoccupied in looking for a repetition of the past that may never come that we miss what God is doing under our very noses. Our task is not to 'look back'; it is to 'be strong and work', in the assurance that God is with us (4). The great, overmastering consideration is that His Spirit should remain among us - if only that be true, all will yet be well, and nothing else matters. Indeed, that is the true glory, and in this we have good reason to rejoice.

9) 2:10-19

Haggai's third prophecy was given some two months after the second. This is a somewhat complicated passage, but its message is of major importance, and it will be well worth the discipline of thinking it through carefully, in order to find its meaning. It takes the form of a parabolic saying on the subject of holiness and sin. It takes us back to the Levitical ordinances and ritual about ceremonial cleansing. The prophet asks for a judgment from the priests on two questions concerning the holy and the unclean, in order to make application of the answer they give to the moral and spiritual condition of the nation. The first question (12) has to do with the communication of the holiness of holy objects to other objects brought into contact with them: whether - if a person carried holy flesh in the skirt of his garment and touched any food with it, it would become holy in consequence. The priests answered correctly with a negative, in terms of Leviticus 6:27 which indicates that though the skirt of the garment itself was made holy by the holy flesh, it could not communicate this holiness any further. The second question has to do with the spread of legal defilement, and this also was answered correctly by the priests: according to Numbers 19:13, 22, whoever was defiled by touching a dead body made everything unclean that he touched. Here, then, is the message: 'holiness which passed from the source to an object immediately in touch with the latter did not spread further; but pollution infected not only the person in contact with it, but whatever he touched' (G. Adam Smith). It is this that the prophet proceeds to apply to the people's relation to the Lord and to their experience at that time. What that application was we shall look at in tomorrow's Note.

10) 2:10-19

To understand the message Haggai is imparting, and the application of the parable, we need to think of the general background. Haggai had prophesied in the sixth month, and had said to them that the reason why they had sown much and brought forth little, and why they had economic stringency and insolvency was that they had not been right with God. He had summoned them to repent; and they had done so, and got down to the work of rebuilding. They had been hard at it for three months, but things had not improved in any appreciable way; their crops were no more prosperous, the seed was not yet in the barn, the vine and the fig tree had not brought forth. And they were, in effect, reproaching the prophet, saying, 'You said that if we repented, God would prosper us'. And, against that attitude, Haggai spoke this word, saying, 'There has not been time, as yet, for the change to work. Holiness is not so infectious as uncleanness and disease. If contact with a holy thing has but a slight effect, but contact with the unclean a much greater (11-13), your attempts to rebuild the Temple have less good effect on your condition now than the bad influence of your past sinfulness. That is why adversity still continues.' The truth is, the effects of sin and corruption are very pervasive; getting rid of them is not an easy matter. Holiness, the work of restoration, is uphill work, and does not become established without much patience and perseverance. It takes longer by far than the process of deterioration and declension. G. Adam Smith comments, 'These poor colonists, in their hope deferred, were learning the lesson, which humanity finds hard, that repentance and new-born zeal do not immediately change our material condition; but the consequences of sin often outweigh the influence of conversion, and though devoted to God and industrious we may still be punished for a sinful past. Evil has an infection greater than holiness. Its results are more extensive and lasting. By no casuistry did Haggai appeal to the priests, but by ethical truth embedded in human experience.'

11) 2:10-19

Haggai's message, as we have interpreted it, is true both in personal life and in national life. When we lose out spiritually, we may lose a great deal in a short time, but we rarely recover that ground as quickly as we lost it, nor is it ours to say when or how we may recover it. This is the point that John Bunyan makes so wonderfully in 'The Holy War', when Emmanuel was driven out of the city of Mansoul through the neglect and sin of its citizens. It was long e'er He was wooed back again. In the same way, in national life, the famine of the Word caused by the wilful neglect of the Scriptures and the distortion of its truths is taking a long time to recover from. This is why revival tarries; and it is simplistic and naive in the extreme to suppose that the merest gesture of repentance is all that is needed to put matters right, and woo back the grieved Spirit of God into our midst again. Not so: let us remember how the prophet Samuel laboured for a quarter of a century after the declension of the time of the Judges before Israel was revived and brought again to a position of spiritual prosperity. To begin with, after his anointing and commissioning as God's man, things got worse, not better. To change the metaphor, suppose a great ocean-going vessel, travelling at a speed of thirty knots, is given the signal 'Full speed astern'. What happens? The engines are put into reverse, but the ship still goes on in the same direction, because its original momentum keeps it going, it may be for some miles, before the reversed engines gradually slow down its motion. Only then, after long enough, will the effect of the 'full speed astern' begin to become evident. This is what Haggai is saying. God has given the 'full speed astern' signal; the people have obeyed; but they must be patient and give it time to have its effect.

12) 2:10-19

And in the waiting time, there is encouragement for God's people (15-19). 'From this day', God says, 'will I bless you'. There are two things to be said about this. On the one hand, there is a sense in which a dawning understanding of God's word, and an appreciation of what He is saying to us, always brings an assurance of the divine presence and blessing. Simply to see what that word is, is to be blest. Indeed, for God to speak at all to us, whatever He should say, is benediction beyond all our deserving, for it means that He wills to have fellowship with us, and that is always a situation of hope. On the other hand, what these words mean is that God is there, on the field, working out His sovereign purposes in us and with us. Faber's words are wonderfully reassuring in this connection. Let us take them as a comment on these verses:

Workman of God! O lose not heart,
but learn what God is like,
And, in the darkest battlefield,
Thou shalt know where to strike.

Thrice blest is he to whom is given
the instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
is most invisible.

13) 2:20-23

The final prophecy of Haggai was given on the same day as the third. The point of the prophet's words seems to be this: the people were looking all around them, seeing the powers arrayed against them (see the appropriate passages in Ezra), and they were trembling and tempted to lose heart once more, because of these outward pressures that were besetting them. And God said to them, 'Leave them to me, I will shake the heavens and the earth'. The words are apocalyptic in tone, but we need not doubt that this is their first meaning, and that they were an assurance to a frightened people that God was in control. 'Cease from man', cries the prophet, 'and look above you; look to God, He is sovereign and will break these powers.' Such was the promise to the trembling exiles. But more: with that promise, and in it, there was also the assurance that the glorious messianic 'succession' - that which runs through all Israel's history from the beginning right up to Bethlehem - would be preserved and secured by the divine power. This is the point of the reference to Zerubbabel in 21 and 23, for at this point in the ongoing history of redemption he represented the messianic hope. This is an important consideration for an adequate understanding of the overall message of the prophet in the context of the whole Old Testament revelation, and we shall continue to think about it in tomorrow's Note.

14) 2:20-23

We must never forget, in our studies in the Old Testament, that alongside the immense and sometimes bewildering variety of its writings - history, prophecy, wisdom - there is one overriding and unifying theme throughout - the history and development of the messianic promise and hope; and we have a duty, if we are to understand the post-exilic scriptures aright, to set them in this particular context, and see the contribution that those of Zerubbabel's and Ezra's day and generation were to make in that ongoing development. This has a twofold significance in relation to how we interpret and understand these verses before us. On the one hand, we need to see that the great need is ever that God's people should be faithful to the tasks committed to them, and be determined to fulfil them with all their might, in the knowledge and confidence that in so doing they will be furthering the divine purposes in the world. To this end, God is not slow to give His people every encouragement. Zerubbabel, their leader, is given here a firm assurance that, notwithstanding all the opposition directed at him for exhorting the people to start rebuilding (cf Ezra 5:4), God would give him His special protection. This is the point of the reference to the signet ring - God would take care of him as of a valuable possession, and never let him out of His sight. What a wonderful encouragement to a man under pressure! And may not all His chosen ones confidently rely on the same guardian care (cf Isaiah 54:17)?

15) 2:20-23

On the other hand – and this is the second point of significance in interpreting these verses (see the previous Note) - it is not in the least fanciful to recognise in what is said here an adumbration or foreshadowing of things yet to come. Zerubbabel in this respect is but a type and shadow of the still greater Deliverer who was to come in the fullness of the time, the Messiah, and the troubles and pressures mentioned by Haggai as surrounding the exiles in those days were but the precursors - and indeed the prophecy - of the final troubles associated with the coming Day of the Lord, when in the deepest sense the heavens and the earth shall be shaken, and the new order ushered in wherein dwells righteousness. The thought here leads us naturally and inevitably to the teaching of the New Testament in words such as Acts 17:31, 'He hath appointed a Day, in which He shall judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained'. And, just as in these verses the Messianic promise made to David was transferred to Zerubbabel and his family among David's descendants, so also Zerubbabel himself points forward to another descendant of the line of promise, Jesus Himself (cf Matthew 1:12, 13), Who was to raise up the kingdom of His father David again (Luke 1:32, 33). Of His kingdom there shall be no end, and His name shall endure forever.

16) 2:20-23

Here is a useful summary of the prophecy, given by George Campbell Morgan, in his 'Living Messages': 'We may summarise the whole message of Haggai in one brief word of his second prophecy, "Be strong and work". If we do that, we may leave the issues with God; but we have no right to leave the issues with God unless we work. The initial sin was waiting for the psychic moment. When we are strong and work, then we may be, and shall be, delivered from all anxiety about the ultimate, knowing that He will bless, and accomplish, and perfect. It should be the highest honour of life, its crowning glory and its chief joy in the midst of the ages, to have done one day's work with God.'

To have struck one blow for truth
In the daily fight with lies:
To have done one deed of right
In the face of calumnies:

To have sown in the souls of men
One thought that will not die
To have been a link in the chain of life:
Shall be immortality.