
The Present Need of the Work

Haggai 1-2

Russ Kennedy

Introduction Dateline: August, 520BC
Location: Jerusalem, Israel
Story Sub: WJNR Jerusalem News Radio reporter

As we walk around the city today, we continue to hear the sounds of hammer and saw. Construction is at a high point. Oxen teams are pulling the final cap stones to the wall and they being lifted up and settled into place by the stone masons. The streets through the city are all cleared now. Many, many business are opening and the market is starting to buzz. Some of the herds and flocks are just coming to market. There is a great sense of expectancy as the first harvest was good, despite the seventy years that the land was not worked. But we do hear many saying that this harvest is not as good.

The progress that has been made since we have returned to the land is remarkable for all to see. Under the good leadership of Nehemiah and Zerubbabel, we have seen the people pour their hearts into the work. Many work all day long and then break in the evenings and work on their homes. We have toured around in city where the rubble is cleared and many, many new homes are going up. Outside the city, new villages are springing up as small market centers but mostly as people stake out their familial land and build their homes.

Ezra and the priests have been working to remind us of the Scriptures and have often encouraged us when we struggled and exhorted us when we failed. We are seeing more and more the enthusiasm for rebuilding reaching a real crescendo. The long years in Babylon where we often grieved our loss have now been turned into joyous strength to rebuild what was destroyed.

Now granted, we took our crew over to the old Temple site where many of the priests have been working. The rubble has been cleared, for the most part. But here, the reconstruction seems to lag. Most that I have talked to seem to see getting the city defenses established as a top priority. Also, homes for their families must be built before harvest and winter. We are seeing the results of that effort all over the city and its environs.

We have had word that two new prophets have emerged with a message from God. Zechariah and Haggai have been collaborating with Ezra and Zerubbabel. We will be covering the prophetic message to be delivered by Haggai. Stay tuned to WJNR, Jerusalem News Radio for updates.

Yes, Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1) have begun to preach to the returned exiles. Their essence of their message is, "Now it is time to focus on building God's house, the temple." This is what brings us to these two sermons on Haggai. What does this have to do with us today? How do we, on this side of the cross, listen to preaching to people in circumstances radically different from our own? The last I looked, we weren't trying to build a city. I know some of you have built or bought homes. How do we traverse from Jerusalem in 520BC to Springboro, Ohio in 2007?

What is our attitude toward ministry now? Do you detect a note of apathy? Of unconcernedness? Do you sometimes feel like we think that we have *arrived*?

Let's listen to the message of Haggai. Hear his words...

Exhortation - Go to the Work

Ch. 1

August - Go to the work

Challenging the Leaders

(v.2)

The leaders are challenged first. The political and religious leaders are addressed. Zerubbabel and Joshua are responsible for the attitudes of the people, either by their own example or by a failure to confront those attitudes.

The leaders are confronted with their people's attitudes. Those heart attitudes are demonstrated in a simple statement. The people say, "It is not the time to build the house of the Lord."

Confronting the People

(v.3-4)

The prophet then addresses himself directly to the people. He has confronted the leaders who it appears later were humbled and repentant. Now, the word comes to those who must do the work.

He confronts them indirectly. He shames them. How can you possibly live comfortably while the house of the Lord lies in ruins? Where are their priorities? Are they focused on their comfort? The paneled houses here probably refer, not to basic housing, but to large, expensive and possibly even extravagant excesses.

Considering their Ways

(v.5-6)

Look at what is happening to them. Their lives have become unproductive. They are investing time, energy, money and effort with little real return and certainly, little real satisfaction. How can they continue to be oblivious to what is happening to them? They are living unobserved lives. They need to carefully look at where they have invested their treasure and how it is being ruined and wasted.

Commanding their Obedience

(v.7-11)

God is clear in what needs to be done. Get the resources you need, bring them to the house of the Lord and get the job done. There is where the pleasure of the Lord is. He will be glorified when the work is being done. But they have busied themselves with their concerns and have let the house of God languish.

Because their priorities were wrong, God is actively opposing their prosperity. They are experiencing the chastening of God. This chastening was supposed to give them pause that something was wrong. It is amazing that a people just re-

turned from seventy years of exile and chastening can be so insensible to God in their present trouble.

Carrying out their Responsibility (v.12-15)

They stirred themselves up and obeyed the Lord in action and attitude.

In Holy Performance (v.12)

The leaders rise up and lead. The people rise up and follow. They obey the voice of the Lord. They do so because they fear the Lord. Fearing the Lord is a good thing. A holy fear of the Lord is one of the great motivations for holy obedience.

With God's Promise (v.13)

As the people move to build the house of God, He declares that He is with them. This has to do with His presence. But it more has to do with His poise. He is alongside them, for them, helping them.

By God's Power (v.14)

God moves to stir up their inner man, their spirit so that they will go the work with a good heart. This is God's grace to them. He stirs them up by the power of His Spirit.

Now, let us not miss the New Covenant trajectory here. They are building a house for the Lord. The Lord takes pleasure in dwelling in and among His people. He will exhibit His glory there. But this language here is anticipating a greater house and a greater indwelling. Jesus, the final Temple will come one day. In the destruction of the temple of His body and in the resurrection, a new dwelling place is now being built. It is the church. God is at work putting the living stones in place so that there is growing up the spiritual temple in which He dwells, in whom He delights and through whom He displays His glory. That is what this is all about. The present work of ministry in all we do is the work of building up the house of the Lord, His spiritual temple, His people.

And there is a present application. We have a work of ministry given to us. We are building up the house of God both through evangelism and through edification. These are work we ought to be doing. But often our own priorities are wrong. We are focused on what we think is important. We spending our money, time and energy on things that seem good now but leave us empty and wondering why.

Brothers and sisters, we have need to be stirred up by God and enabled by His Spirit to do the work he commands. We need to repent of our false beliefs and wrong treasures. We need to fear God and obey Him. Yes, there is much that needs to be done. There are lost souls right across street, right across I-75, and right next door to your house. There are believers here who need encouraged, equipped and enabled towards maturity. There are works of ministry to be done here. There are financial needs and ministry strategies and growth hopes. Are you saying in your hearts, "Not now. I just don't have time or energy or money. After all, I need to get... I have to finish... My kinds want..." May God give us the grace of adjusted priorities.

Encouragement - Stop Judging the Work

Ch. 2:1-9

Now it is October. The people have been working hard to obey God and build His house. Now it is the 7th Day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This is an important note. We know from the book of Ezra that the people discovered this feast in the Scriptures and recovered its celebration. It is significant that this feast is pointed out. Israel, having returned from exile, but now living in the times of the Gentiles, is remembering the exodus and anticipating the dwelling of God with His people. All the prophets before, during and after the exile point this indwelling to something greater than a building in Jerusalem. It will be a glorious day for the Messiah will dwell among His people and they in Him with all the Gentiles being gathered in and going up to worship at the holy mountain of God. On the day this is being celebrated, this text takes place. So, in a time when there ought to be rejoicing and anticipation, there is mingled sorrow and discouragement. What is wrong?

Stop Comparing with the Past

(v.1-3)

There are many discouragements in the work. It can be hard work. It can be challenging work. It can be tedious work. People can fail to follow through. There can be a shortage of resources. All of these can make the work of ministry difficult and discouraging. But God still calls us to be faithful. The need for the moment is endurance and perseverance, just keeping on because God is enabling.

But the word that comes through the prophet to the leaders and the people is not about all these discouragements. There is a kind of discouragement that comes when hopes, expectations, strategies and results are not what as desired. Thus it is a heart issue. It is beliefs framing wants that are not being met. So there were those who were looking with disappointment on the Temple they were building. They remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple. What was going up now was smaller and lowly and not nearly so grand and glorious. They were downcast. They were unfavorably comparing past glories with present realities.

Think carefully about this. The very work God commanded and empowered by His Spirit was being disdained because of its smallness. An only a few were around who remembered, but they were spreading discouraging words with disheartening affect. It is a serious thing to look down on the work God is doing. And I would suggest that even here at the Chapel. We may not be as big, or flashy or cool as many churches around us. We must no become disheartened and dissatisfied because we are not what they are. Solomon's Temple was grand but often filled with carnal worship and corrupt practices. The external greatness or size does not and in fact rarely translate into spiritual maturity. So let us not become discouraged with our work of ministry. Let us be careful that discouragement does not lead to dissatisfaction ending in disdain. Can we do more? Yes, thus the Haggai 1, go to the work. Must we watch our hearts for false expectations, hopes and idolatrous desires? Yes, thus Haggai 2, stop disdaining the work.

Continue Working in the Present

(v.4-5)

Here is the exhortation. “Be strong.” It is said to the leaders. It is said to the people. But interestingly, it is recorded as being spoken to Joshua, the current high priest. Any one familiar with their Old Testaments would have remembered that the former Joshua also received the same exhortation, “Be strong. Be of good courage. For I am with you.” He was preparing to conquer the land. Here, they are needing to rebuild the temple. Jesus comes doing both. He enters the promised land of ministry and begins to call out and build up His house. The promises of God and Spirit of God who enabled the conquest after the deliverance from Egypt, came upon Jesus as He was baptized. He then entered the wilderness testing and then began the conquest.

What a good word for us. See the redemptive-historical trajectory? Israel to Christ to us. “Be strong” to Joshua the warrior, to Joshua the high priest, to Jesus the Messiah to us, the servants of Christ doing the work of the ministry. So, not only must you turn away from discouraging comparisons, but you must turn toward your Lord for encouraging words. The communication of God’s Word is how God instills what He is providing. When we hear, “Be strong”, when we believe that this is God’s precept and promise, then we are strong in the Lord to continue to do the difficult work over the long-haul.

So, brothers and sisters; be strong. God is with us. He will complete what He has promised. We must do the work of the ministry in the strength He supplies. Be strong.

Anticipate the Glory of the Promise

(v.6-9)

But a faith building hope focusing reason to be strong is given. There is a glory to come for this house that could not compare to the former. There will be glory that is unimaginable to the human mind and unattainable to human effort. God will shake the heavens and earth. He will bring all the nations into His house. For there will come a day when Jesus will walk on earth as the new temple and the fulfillment of the feast of Tabernacles.

What a good word for us. We will focus our faith working through love on a hope set before us. This is a good work of ministry we do. We must be faithful to it and joyful in it. We must be strong in our hearts and in our labors, not discouraged that it is not as grand as others nor as great as we hope. For this important work is growing into the fulfillment of the promise. The wonder of all God’s people coming in, matured through transforming grace and finally one day being glorified and gathered home energizes the hard work now.

So, brothers and sisters, look forward with hope in such a way that you will work hard and endure much. Do not disdain the day of small things. Long for and lean forward to the day, the glorious day, when all God’s promises will be fulfilled.

So, let me leave you with some concluding thoughts.

Conclusion

God is less interested in our personal comfort than in the ministry's completion. We need to carefully evaluate our priorities and engage God's work of ministry. Use your gifts. Be willing to sacrifice. Obey God.

God's presence with us is known when we get to the task of God's power in us. In other words, we will experience God's presence when we do God's work. Too many are waiting for God for some experience of God before they will move in obedience to God. This is backwards. It leads to passivity and disobedience. Hear God's commands. Believe them as for you. Begin to exercise your will to obey and God has given you the power to obey.

We must never evaluate God's current blessings with the glories of the past. If He is with us, if He is fulfilling His promises to us, then we must accept it however it appears. We must not disparage the work He has given us. We must do the work of ministry by faith through grace for the good of others and His great glory.

Go to the work. Stop looking down on the work. Anticipate the future glory of the work. Be patient until the fulfillment of the promises. And then, God will fill His house, His people with His glory and bring peace in this place.