

THE REPORT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE (Haggai 1:1-6)

Someone has said, "One of the biggest challenges of preaching Haggai is simply finding it in our Bibles". There might be some truth in that, however, in its two chapters, - thirty-eight verses, - it has a tremendous message of encouragement for Christians today. One of its primary emphases is the prophet's compassionate rebuke of God's people for prioritizing their own personal comforts ahead of God's glory. ... A second emphasis is on how Haggai demonstrated the blessing of God towards the obedient. He also reminds his people not to be discouraged by what is happening around them because there are better times ahead. And he concludes his brief prophecy with the promise God's eternal Kingdom will be established.

It is a practical and contemporary message with many lessons for us to appreciate and apply. We begin with an introduction.

The Old Testament prophets are divided into three periods of Jewish history:

1. those who prophesied *before* the Jews were taken into captivity by the Babylonians (*pre-exilic prophets*, Obadiah, Joel, Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah),
2. those who prophesied *during* the Babylonian captivity (*exilic prophets*, Daniel and Ezekiel)
3. those who prophesied *after* the Jews returned from Babylon, 538 BC onwards (*post-exilic prophets*, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

Haggai was an old man when he began his prophesying, which only lasted from the end of August to December, 520 BC. There was then a slight overlap with a young man called Zechariah, who prophesied for

some forty years. Malachi prophesied just less than fifty years after Zechariah, which makes him the final prophet in the Old Testament era.

How encouraging it is God used the two different generations working together, - old Haggai and young Zechariah. Their messages came straight from God, and they preached faithfully and fervently, without tampering with the content God had given them. They simply related what they received from Him.

What did God's people need to hear? Coming out of the Exile, they were extremely vulnerable for they had been humiliated and humbled in Babylon. And even though, - at first, - they returned joyfully to Jerusalem, they soon realised the immensity of the work of resettlement. It was massive ... and they were not adequately prepared in their own minds for what was needing to be done. It was far too much ... How would a broken, discouraged, disheartened small nation of people ever hope to claw its way back to where they once were, in the days of David. ... It seemed so utterly impossible!

From the time they came back to when Haggai was prophesying was about eighteen years, and during those years, they had many ongoing issues and oppositions to contend with. ... It understandably affected their attitude to the work, and to each other, and to the Lord. ... They started off 'drained', and they found it so difficult to engender hope or ambition for, - as they saw it, - they were 'drowning' in discouragements and uncertainties. ... It is beautiful though, how Haggai addressed them, - he did not lambast them, or harangue them, or was impatient with them. While he *did* rebuke them, he rebuked them gently.

What did he have to tell them? ... What did they need to hear from God?... Apply how we would answer that question to our own present setting ... What do God's people need to hear today? ... Surely it is the

same message Haggai preached in 520 BC for we live with many similarities, - the people of God faced derision from all sides, and some of it came in a subtle form, and some were outright adversarial.

Yes, they were back in their own land and in their own city, but the ‘scars’ from their time in Babylon were still raw. Also, they now had no shortage of hindrances to the work of rebuilding the temple and the resettlement in Jerusalem. ... Another sad factor was their view of God had become affected, and they were not clearly realising Who He was and what He could do for them. They had allowed their vision of God to be ‘knocked out of focus’ by the many things going wrong around them ... and try as hard as they could, they felt so impotent. ... It was as if God was not up to the task.

Let’s be careful not to judge them too harshly though, for isn’t it the same today? We look at our society and we could despair. However, what keeps us going? Why do we *not* give up? ... We do not give up because God has not given up. Instead, even in this twenty-first century, we are assured He has never abandoned His faithful remnant and He is not about to start now! ... The God of Haggai is our God too!

He has never changed ... and the message for His people has never changed either. Even during these discouraging times, - as it was in Haggai’s day, - God desires His people to be confident in Him. ... King and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers come and go but our God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). He has never replaced or revised any of His promises for He is entirely consistent and He will, therefore, bring to pass everything He has decreed to His glory for He works all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:11,12). ... That means He glories in His Church, and in His plan for His people ... and *there* is where you and I have our confidence!

These people in Jerusalem knew Jehovah was their God. There is no mention of them worshipping other gods for these people knew *God* had kept them and had returned them to their own city! ... But with all the surrounding difficulties, they lapsed into a condition of confusion and alarm which they allowed to take precedence over God's glory, and what He had done for them. ... They were not worshipping idols but, at the same time, they were not truly confident in Jehovah. God chose them and He loved them in the same way God chose and loves you and me. We belong to Him, and He is jealous over us. He will not allow *anything* to destroy the faith He has given us to believe in Him, **Is. 41:10** Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. ... That is how firm a foundation we have in the Lord! ... How many times He has blessed us, and kept on loving us, throughout every kind of circumstance!

And He loved these children of Israel who had previously been sorrowing in captivity by the rivers of Babylon, where they had been sitting down and weeping day after day as they remembered Jerusalem (Ps. 137... How shall we ever sing praise to Jehovah again, like we used to?! ... And yet, God did what He promised He would do, even before they were taken off to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar ... Nebuchadnezzar was part of God's plan for their chastisement, but He brought them home again to Jerusalem ... And they had been 'home' for almost twenty years, ... since 538 BC when the Persian King Cyrus allowed them to return under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David ... and 42,360 of them *did* make the journey home from Babylon. Imagine the excitement as they came over the Judean hills and when they saw their beloved city before them! ... Then, two years later, - in 536 BC, - they began to rebuild the temple, but the enormity of the task and the opposition of their enemies caused the work to stop ... and

for the next sixteen years (536-520 BC), nothing was done ... not even attempted! The building of the temple was postponed, which meant they had no central place to worship, as in the 'glory-days' before the Exile. ... And it affected their spiritual condition!

It is now 520 BC, and the people had become normalised with how their condition had developed. There had been no prophets since Daniel and Jeremiah, during the Exile ... No prophets since they returned home. The young people growing up in Jerusalem had never heard a prophet prophesy ... and many of the older people had forgotten! ... And with the other priorities taken precedence, the people were so busy taking care of their own needs ... the things of God 'grew strangely dim' because they were relegated 'down the list'. Yes, on return to Jerusalem there was much work to be done, - the wall needed rebuilt and their homes needed to be prepared for their city had lain in ruins for almost seventy years. ... All this meant they had to begin 'at the bottom and work up', but many of the people had 'lost heart'. ... When they were in Babylon, they used to think, "It will all be so different when we get back to Jerusalem!" No, it would not, for when they were back in Jerusalem, they had lost their vigour.

To a certain degree, it is understandable. It is nonetheless sad that the people for whom God had done so much were so despondent, disheartened, and discouraged. ... They had lost their 'sparkle'. ... Yes, of course, the work was hard for they had a vast amount to restore ... It was bleak for their seemed to be nothing going for them, or so they thought ... and then along came Haggai with God's message, "*God is on your side. He has not forgotten you. He has not left you*". The God to Whom they had prayed in Babylon had proved His faithfulness by restoring them to their own land ... He had answered their cries and had resettled them in their beloved city ... *Surely* He was *more* than worthy

of their praise and worship! ... He was not receiving it though, and He lovingly spoke to them through Haggai, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built (Hag. 1:2). ... We are not ready yet for we are busy seeing to our own priorities. God continued, ⁴ Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled [*panelled ... with all the latest mod-cons, top-of-the-range*] houses, and this house [*of Mine*] lie waste?

There is nothing wrong with having a beautiful home, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of your labour as long as you realise and remember you have them because of the goodness of God. ... That goes for our church too, - we have lasted all these years because of the goodness and the faithfulness of God. Like the children of Israel, we are privileged to be here today, and we are privileged because of all God has done for us. ... Where would we be if we had turned this place into nothing more than a religious entertainment centre, where the 'vain janglings' of a wayward people had replaced the preaching of God's Word? Where would we be! ... Our priority is God and the things of God, and since He has done so much for us, He has us here to do for Him!

Not all the Jews took the opportunity to return to Jerusalem because some had decided to settle in Babylon. Most of them had no longing to return home and become involved with the work of restoration. Their children had married the Babylonians, and *their* children were being brought up in idolatry. ... But those Jews who *had* returned to Jerusalem had the *longing* to return because they had *known* the reality of God's abiding presence. Babylon was never their home!

Like the Jews, we are privileged for God has blessed us with more than we merit. He has saved us, He keeps us, and He will continue to keep us. He could have allowed us to slowly decompose into the mainstream, but He keeps us going because His purpose for us is to serve Him and to bring

Him glory in this place. He is good to us, individually and as a fellowship. ... He is even keeping us in such times as these. He is faithful. ... What we are reminded of in this prophecy of Haggai is we must not take His goodness and His favour lightly, or become complacent, or give way to feeling dejected, like the folks in Jerusalem.

The Lord had asked them, **Haggai 1:4** Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste? ... What more can you and I give to the Lord, that we have not given already? What more can we do?

It is not always about finances, obviously though the rebuilding of the temple had to be paid for ... and that is important, but another prophet asked, what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:8) ... God required the people of Jerusalem to recommit themselves to His service, so their work would not be in vain, **Haggai 1:5** Consider your ways. **6** Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.

As we shall see, those people in Haggai's day *would* and *did* learn for this is a beautiful story of God's grace toward His people. They *did* build the temple. It was not as magnificent as Solomon's temple, but it is not all about a building ... it is about the people and how they worship God in the building. ... May the Lord encourage and teach us as we study our way through this book. Amen.