

The Word at Work

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[0 : 00] David is going to come and preach for us very shortly, but before that we're going to read the passage from which he's going to preach tonight. That's Haggai chapter 1, verses 1 to 15.

If you've got a church Bible, it's on page 791. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

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. It is time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies in ruins.

Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. You've sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill.

You clothe yourselves, but no one's warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways.

[1 : 13] Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much. And behold, it came too little.

It came too little. And when you brought it home, it blew away. Why, declares the Lord of hosts, because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.

Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew and the earth has withheld its produce.

And I've called for a drought in the land and the hills on the grain, the new wine, the oil and what the ground brings forth on man and beast and on all their labors.

Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet as the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

[2 : 30] And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the 24th day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius, the king.

This is the word of the Lord. Well, we turn this evening to the book of Haggai in the Old Testament. We're looking at the first chapter. Well, we're hoping to look at the whole of the first chapter this evening.

Restoration was the name of a BBC TV series, I think a number of years ago, maybe 20 years ago or so, hosted by Griff Riss-Jones. It involved viewers choosing a historically valuable but now neglected, dilapidated building so that it could be restored to something like its former glory. And restoring the appearance or the functionality of a building or another object is often a very costly and time-consuming business. We all know stories, perhaps we've had experience ourselves of restoring a house, a musical instrument, an item of clothing, even a car, a bike to its former glory. And such work is often a labor of love, often one that takes time, money, no small measure of patience. And there's a sense, I think, in which the gospel of Jesus Christ can be viewed as a great work of restoration.

[4 : 04] Through Jesus Christ, God is ushering in a new creation, a renewed cosmos. The whole arc of the Bible's storyline bends towards the restoration and renewal of all things in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not just that God, it's not that God is kind of putting things back together again or just putting things back together again the way they once were.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is far more than a repair job. It is a work of restoration, renewal, and recreation.

God remaking the cosmos, reshaping His people into the very image of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in our evening worship, on the next few weeks, God willing, we're going to be looking at this book of the Bible that I think is in part all about restoration.

Not just about the restoration of a building, although that is certainly involved. It's more fundamentally about the restoration of a people.

[5 : 17] Because here in the book of Haggai, we meet the God who restores. In its historical context, God is restoring His people Israel to the land after a long period of exile.

He's restoring His temple in Jerusalem, reestablishing the priority of worship amongst His people. He is restoring the honor of His name among the nations.

Eighteen years previous to the messages contained in this book, around 538 BC, a large contingent of God's people had returned to Judah after captivity and exile.

And we read of Cyrus' decree in the opening verse, really, verses of the book of Ezra. Cyrus, king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth.

Charge me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord.

[6 : 28] The God of Israel, He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And as you might imagine, those first faithful pioneering believers had traveled back to Judah with great enthusiasm, immense hope for the future.

They were being restored, a new start, a new beginning, beckoned. Here were a people committed to rebuilding the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

But by Haggai's day, that's about 18 years later, the temple work had fallen into abeyance. That great work of restoration appeared to have stalled.

A general air of apathy, lethargy, had settled over the land. Life was hard. Times were tough. Things were far from easy for the people as they sought to eke out a living.

And it was into this situation that the prophet Haggai came bringing God's Word, who had somewhat beleaguered, distracted, and harassed people.

[7 : 36] In the second year of Darius the king in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak the high priest.

Haggai is himself someone we know very little about. Brief mentions elsewhere in Scripture, notably in the book of Ezra. And there we learn that Haggai and Zechariah, his contemporary, were prophets together, involved in stirring up the people to rebuild the temple after their return from exile.

So we read in Ezra 5 verse 1, Now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Edo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.

Ezra 6 verse 14, The elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Edo. In other words, Haggai didn't minister on his own.

Zechariah preached and prophesied alongside him. And it's actually difficult to know what kind of interaction or engagement these two prophets had with one another.

[8 : 57] But it's clear that they're very different styles and they're very distinctive messages. We're both used to further God's purposes in the land and amongst His people.

And I think that is simply a reminder to us that God often calls and uses very different personalities and voices to advance His kingdom war.

You'll notice here in chapter 1 that Haggai is described as a prophet. Also in verse 13, he's described as a messenger of the Lord.

In chapter 2 verse 1 and chapter 2 verse 10, again, he's described as a prophet. And this is the thing that really stands out about this man. His family connections, his age, his education, they're of no consequence compared to this fact.

They're not even mentioned. The word he bears, the message he brings to the people and their leaders is what is of significance. The word of God takes center stage in this book.

[10:07] Haggai is not someone giving his own ideas, proffering his own analysis of the people's situation. He speaks the word that he has been given, the word of the Lord of hosts.

Haggai, we read in verse 13 of chapter 1, the messenger of the Lord spoke to the people with the Lord's message. And that is, I think, the essence of all preaching ministry, to preach the word we have received, we have been given, not our own ideas or blessed thoughts.

Haggai's message to the people and to us is one of divine authority. It's a revelation of the will of God for the people of God. And so for a short period, just a few months actually, between August and December, 520 BC, God's Spirit comes upon Haggai and uses him in a remarkable spiritual awakening amongst the people.

For these brief months, four months, he becomes the very mouthpiece of God. And his book consists of a series of different oracles, sermons, if you like, pronounced by the prophet during this period.

The power of God rests upon his ministry, really to an unusual degree. And during that period, Jerusalem and Judah are transformed.

[11:40] The house of God rebuilt, the glory of the Lord seen once more. Many years ago, the National Bible Society here in Scotland had a strap line that was used on much of their publicity materials.

It read, the word at work. The word at work. And that's what we see here in Haggai chapter 1. The word at work.

So let's look at three aspects of the word at work that we see here. As time, I notice, is disappearing fast. I haven't even got to my first point.

I've actually got to, I wonder if we could be here for a while. Anyway, I just really encourage you. Chapter 1, verse 2 through verse 6.

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 paneled houses while this house lies in ruins?

[12:52] Now, therefore, says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways. You've sown much, harvested little. You eat, you never have enough. You drink, you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but you're not warm.

The one who earns wages does so only to put them into a bag with holes. So Haggai really begins his message, if you like, by focusing on the conditions, the circumstances that people now find themselves in.

And in short, things are not going well. There's high inflation, prices rocketing. Crops had failed to produce a good harvest. They were experiencing a time of economic hardship.

And Haggai uses this to try and grab their attention. He wants them to see that they've got all their priorities all wrong. No enjoyment.

They had no pleasure, no delight in God or in God's good gifts to them. He says in verse 9, You looked for much, it came to little. When you brought it home, it blew away.

[13:54] Why? Declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins. While each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.

And I've called for drought on the land and the hills and the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors. So what Haggai is saying here is that what they're experiencing is a sign really of God's displeasure.

God is withholding his blessing from them. We have to be very careful. I think Corey made this point a couple of weeks ago in the morning service to make judgments about God's providences.

So we have to be very careful. But here, Haggai is simply applying the teaching of God's Word. Particularly, Deuteronomy 28.

And in that passage, God declares to his people that if they are faithless to him, they will experience his discipline. So in Deuteronomy 28.30, You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall ravish her.

[15:11] You shall build a house, but you shall not dwell in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit. And so Haggai is pointing out to the people that what was happening to them was really a fulfillment of God's Word.

Look at the challenge he gives them in verse 4. 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 paneled houses while this house

lies in ruins?

So God's Word is exposing the reality of the people's hearts. Haggai is saying your focus, your priorities are all wrong.

You're worshiping really yourselves first and the Lord only a distant second. They should have been rebuilding the temple. They should have been putting God first. They should have been focused on worship.

They should have been looking to Him. But their eyes were elsewhere. And so they languished in spiritual indifference and apathy. Now we need to be clear that it's not that the Lord is against them building their houses or even building them first.

[16:21] He's not against them roofing their houses and completing them. He's not even against them making their houses comfortable with beautiful wooden paneling. The real problem is this, that they've done all of these things, but they haven't really started to work on the house of the Lord.

They haven't really begun to restore the Lord's house. And so Haggai says to them, Is it not time? Maybe that's God's message to someone here this evening.

Is it not time? Is it not time to get serious about your faith? Is it not time to speak to others of Jesus? Is it not time to heed God's call upon your life? Is it not time to profess faith? Is it not time to come to the Lord's table? How do we understand and apply what Haggai says here?

What does the temple of the Lord's house stand for in our own context? Let me say that it's not an analogy with our buildings.

[17:34] Our physical buildings are not temples. In the New Testament, of course, Paul likens the church to a temple, a community of worship, as we were hearing about this morning, where God dwells in and with His people.

Who is the one that stands at the center of the church as a temple? Who is its king and head? Jesus Christ is the true temple, the meeting place of heaven and earth, truly divine, truly human. Christ is Himself the fulfillment of all that the temple represented. He claimed of Himself that something greater than the temple was here in Matthew 12.

And for Israel, of course, the temple was where God's people met for worship. A place of, again, we were hearing this this morning, of atonement being made for sin.

It was a place that God had given to His people as a gift to maintain fellowship and communion.

What I think Haggai is driving at here is the primacy of the public worship of Almighty God.

[18:47] He wants them to see that the public worship of God is always to be a priority for God's people. God is looking for those whose attitude reflects that of the psalm that we sung.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts, to me. What about us this evening? Does worship have a grip or a pull on your heart?

It's worship that engages with the presence of a holy God. It's worship with sacrifice at its center, where the shedding of blood is witnessed.

Worship where atonement is made. And that worship here in Haggai is, as again we were hearing this morning, a foreshadowing of our Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross.

At the center of our worship is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Because it's only in Him and through Him that any of us can draw near to God.

[19:56] Beware any form of worship, certainly any form of Christian worship, that doesn't have the cross at its center. We preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified, the crucified and risen Jesus.

And if we would be healthy Christians and healthy churches, we need to have the word of the cross injected into our veins. And God says to us through the prophet Haggai, My worship, my adoration must come first.

I must be at the center. That's, I think, what public worship is intended to do. Designed to fuel our love for God. The God who redeems and saves a people.

The God who is beautiful beyond compare. The God who has made us for Himself. And how easy it is, friends, for us to mess up our priorities.

To get them all wrong. Suddenly, you know, it's making a living. That's the supreme goal of our life. Or it's our family. Or it's our hobby. Or our pastime. Or our health. We obsess about these things.

[21:06] And our supreme desire is not for the living God. Remember, Jesus' words, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And all these things will be added to you.

Worshiping the living God is to be a priority. Does His love and grace captivate us? Are we hungering and thirsting after Him? Are we seeking first the kingdom?

Jesus reminds us it's when we get our priorities straight that everything else follows. The word of God is at work.

Uncovering, exposing the people's wrong priorities, their sins. Second thing. I'll go quicker.

Secondly, the word is at work challenging the people's ways in verses 7 and 8.

So we read there, Thus says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways, go up to the hills, bring wood, build a house, that I may take pleasure in it, and that I may be glorified, says the Lord.

[22 : 16] So Haggai's challenging the people to stop and think about the way that they were living their lives. He wants them really to change direction.

And you see here what He commands them to do. Go to the hills, get the raw materials, build the house of the Lord. And He tells them why they are to do this. All this is to be done so that God Himself will be glorified.

It's to be done for God's good pleasure. They're to put God first. They're to put worship first. Not for their own pleasure and glory, but really for the Lord's. The primacy, the primary business of God's church.

We're redeemed to worship Him. And that's to influence, it's to affect the way we think about worship. It's not about really what pleases us, it's about what pleases Him.

Our aim is to give God pleasure. Beware in the business of giving Him the glory, aren't we? To God be the glory. Great things He has done.

[23 : 22] We're to be taken up with Him. Often in Christian church, there's lots of muddled thinking about worship. So for some, it's kind of going to a show.

We want to be entertained. For some, it's all about their needs being met. And of course, we all have needs. But they're not to overshadow and dominate.

First and foremost, we come to worship saying, You, O Lord, are worthy. Not, I am needy. Because it's not about us.

It's primarily about Him. And yes, of course, in some circles, we have great emphasis on preaching and teaching. But there's a danger that we have such an emphasis on that, everything else gets pushed out.

Worship becomes more than, little more than a lecture about the Bible. And of course, preaching is primary. But not to the exclusion of prayer, or praise, or the sacraments, or the confessing of our faith.

[24 : 26] All of these elements are important because they stress the importance of the gospel story itself. And here, Haggai reminds us that we're to set our hearts on pleasing God.

He is to take pleasure in our worship. He, if I can put it this way, the audience that really matters.

There was a book a number of years ago entitled, Up With Worship.

And in the book, the author describes a proper attitude to worship in these terms. Lord, this church service is for you. I am here to give you pleasure.

Is that why we gather on the Lord's Day? To give Him pleasure. Is that the way that we think? Who is it we sing for and to whom do we want to hear our prayers and confessions?

It is God Himself. Are not our gifts for His work? It's not the sermon designed to help direct our attention to who He is and what He's done.

[25 : 38] Surely our aim must always be to please Him. Martin Lloyd-Jones once wrote, Put at the center the only one who has a right to be there, the Lord of glory, who so loved you that He went to the cross and bore the punishment and the shame of your sins and died for you.

I think that's very good advice. Put Him at the center. Because the Christian life is not about adhering to a moral code, trying our best to be good.

It's all about knowing and loving God. The God who has revealed Himself in Scripture. Who God is drives everything in the Christian life. He's at the very center of it all.

You shall have no other gods before me. So here we have a people feeling, I think, the rebuke of God's Word.

They didn't have their priorities straight. They'd neglected divine worship. And so God sends His messenger with His Word to expose their sin. To challenge the way that they were living.

[26 : 56] And that really brings us to the third and the final thing here in just a few minutes. The Word at work. Not just exposing and challenging, but the Word at work transforming the people's lives.

And we have that response in verses 12 through 15 to Haggai's words. Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God.

And the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, declares the Lord. This is a very unusual passage in the Old Testament. Why do I say that? Because we hardly ever read of this happening.

The response to the prophetic ministry of God's Word, we're used to hearing as one of disobedience, unfaithfulness, idolatry, apathy. But here, the good news is that the people listened, and they took God's Word to heart.

[28 : 10] They were humbled. They repented. They changed their ways. Under Haggai's preaching, they received the Word of God with faith. They feared the Lord.

Literally, they feared from before Yahweh. They start to show God the honor and respect that He's due. And that fear of God isn't terror. If the people had only felt terror, they would have run away. But you notice here, they run towards Him. They obey Him. They trust Him. They worship Him. A transformation has taken place. They are drawn to His beauty and glory.

To fear the Lord involves us seeing something of God's majesty and glory. And this is what lay behind the people's obedience. It was the obedience, not simply of fear, but of faith.

A sense of God's character weighed and pressed down upon them. They trembled before the Word of God. Remember Isaiah's words, Isaiah 66 too.

[29 : 15] This is the one to whom I will look. He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my Word. And so the impact of God's Word upon them was to draw them back, to know Him and love Him and obey Him.

Now, of course, what we read about here is a remarkable transformation. It is essentially a revival. Sometimes that is how the Word of God works.

A revolution takes place. A situation is turned around in dramatic fashion. Now, we were hearing from Kelly Capic yesterday how God often takes His time.

And that is very true. But there are occasions when He works very speedily and quickly. And that is what happens at a time of revival and renewal.

The normal operations of the Holy Spirit are greatly intensified and accelerated. The work of the Spirit is magnified. It's speeded up. The work of God is not carried out in a different way.

[30 : 23] It is merely accomplished more powerfully and dramatically and suddenly than normal. And such times are extraordinary. They're not normative for the church.

For more often than not, the change God's Word brings is less dramatic and sudden. But for all that, it's no less real. Paul tells the Thessalonians, We also thank God constantly for this, That when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, You accepted it not as the Word of men, But as what it really is, the Word of God, Which is at work in you believers.

1 Thessalonians 2. God's Word is always at work in the lives of God's people To bring transformation and change. To conform us to the pattern and image of the Lord Jesus.

I can never remember what stories I've told and whenever I've told them. So, there is a story that I think I've probably told it before. The man watching a sculptor chiseling away at a block of marble, Asking him, What are you doing?

What are you making? The sculptor replied he was making a statue of a horse. And the man was amazed. He commented, That must be a very difficult thing to do.

[31 : 48] The sculptor said, No, no, no. It's very, very simple. I just chip away everything that doesn't look like a horse. And God's Word is the chisel that He uses to chip away at our lives Everything that doesn't look like Jesus.

He is at work within us to change us, To make us more like Him. He is restoring His image in our lives. How is the Word of God at work in your life today?

What is He chipping away at? What is He getting rid of? Your pride, Your selfishness, Your apathy, Your indifference. And notice here that this obedience on behalf of God's people is encouraged and stimulated by God's promise.

We will read in verse 13. Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, Spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, Declares the Lord.

So yes, There's rebuke and there's challenge in the Word of God, But there's also encouragement and comfort. God stirs up His people to work on the temple, To reinstate public worship, By declaring to them, I am with you.

[33 : 05] That's the great promise of the covenant. Here is the God who has promised to be with His people always. This work shall not be undertaken on their own.

He will be with them. He will help them. He will bless them. He will sustain them. The Lord of hosts is with His people. And to stimulate their faith and confidence, He reminds them of that great, wonderful truth.

I am with you. Great refrain, isn't it? We find right throughout the Scriptures. Here are words that have stirred up believers to work, And serve and persevere, Even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Words that have strengthened the resolve of those facing temptations. Consoled those enduring painful trials. Comforted those traveling through dark valleys. Maybe that's what someone needs to hear this evening.

The Lord speaking into your life, Into your situation, Into your circumstances, And saying, I am with you.

[34 : 09] What does the old hymn say? The storm may roar about without me, My heart may low be laid, But God is round about me, And can I be dismayed?

Friends, our God does not keep His distance. He doesn't keep us at arm's length. He stands with His people. He suffers with His people. He doesn't, He's not standing outside looking in.

He doesn't leave us to ourselves. He draws near. He comes close. It's not without reason that Jesus has that title, Isn't it? Emmanuel, God with us. He is in it with us.

He has joined Himself to us. Isn't that incredible? He is with us in our struggles, And our trials, And our temptations.

He is with us in the work of the gospel. He is with us in the work of mission. He is with us in our weakness, To carry us forward. He is with us in our folly, To bring us hope.

[35 : 12] So take heart, Christian brother or sister, This evening. He is with you tonight. For here is the God who restores, Restores people, Communities, Worship, Churches.

And He carries out this work through His Word, By His Spirit. The Word of God that exposes, That challenges, And by God's grace transforms.

And how we need in our own day, A renewed confidence, In the living and enduring Word of God. May His powerful Word, Continue to do its work, In our lives and in our hearts.

May it continue to restore us, And to transform us, Into the very image, Of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

Lord, We pray that we might know, The power of Your Word, Working in us, And through us. We pray that we might, Take heart, From, Your Word, That encourages us, And reminds us, That we are not alone, As your people.

[36 : 29] That you are with us, And you will never leave us, Nor forsake us. Lord, We all get our priorities, Mixed up. We all, Deviate.

We all, Are tempted. Lord, How we need Your strength. How we need Your Word, To expose our sin. To bring us to, Repentance and faith.

And to lead us forward. Lord, Be pleased to do that, In our lives, And in our church. And all for Your glory. Amen. Amen.