

Comfort My People

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read scripture for us. The passage that David's going to come and preach to us from! is the Old Testament book of Haggai, chapter 2, verses 1 to 9.

Okay, this is the word of the Lord. In the seventh month, on the 21st day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Speak now to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, 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, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest.

Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. 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. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in.

[1 : 15] And I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts.

And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. Amen. This is God's holy word. Well, we turn this evening to the book of the prophet Haggai in the Old Testament, and to our second sermon, and what, God willing, will be a four-sermon series.

It's known as the Bayou Tapestry. Although, when I was reading about it, technically, apparently, it's an embroidery rather than a tapestry.

Who knew these things? I don't even know the difference between a tapestry and embroidery, but apparently that's what it is. And if you know of it, it famously depicts events leading up to the Norman conquest of England, culminating, of course, the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

The cloth comprises 58 different scenes. Many of them have captions written below. And one of those scenes depicts someone known as Bishop Odo.

[2 : 38] He was the stepbrother of William the Conqueror, forcing his men onward or towards an oncoming kind of hail of arrows.

And underneath, there's an inscription that reads, Here, Bishop Odo, holding his club, comforts his men. And I suppose that's not really the way that we think of being comforted.

Someone chasing after us with a club. But the original idea behind the English word for comfort is the meaning to give strength.

And in the tapestry, Bishop Odo is seeking to strengthen his troops by prodding them into action, albeit in a somewhat drastic fashion.

And perhaps that's a good way for us to think about the book of the prophet Haggai. Because it is in this sense a message of comfort that Haggai the prophet brings to the people of God of his day.

[3 : 48] Robust, vigorous oracles designed to strengthen the Lord's people in their faith, and beyond that, to spur them into action.

Now, in the previous chapter that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, we read there of the leaders and the people being stirred up under Haggai's ministry to faith and good works.

They renewed their commitment to rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. They resolved to put worship, the worship of Yahweh, back at the very top of their agenda.

But notice how chapter 2 of the book opens. Verse 1, And so, what we find here is, Haggai once again bringing the word of the Lord to the people.

Only this time, it's in a situation of great discouragement. We're told the precise date of Haggai's message, the 21st day of the seventh month.

[5 : 17] It's now October 520 B.C. A month or so has passed since Haggai's initial word to the people from God. And those intervening weeks, it seems, had seen the people eventually run into a kind of headwind of different discouragements.

All their initial euphoria, enthusiasm, excitement had begun to wane. Their strength had begun to kind of seep away.

And I think that's one of the things that we must be aware of and indeed prepare for in the work of God's kingdom.

Discouragements are inevitable as we seek to move the work of God forward in our particular context. And discouragement is, I think, a favorite stratagem of the evil one, as he seeks to oppose God's work and oppose God's people.

So, the question is, what stimulated these feelings of discouragement and despondency among the people? I think the key to understanding what's going on here is to be found in verse 3 of the chapter.

[6 : 34] 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? What's going on here?

Well, I think what's happening here is that what's being highlighted is that the people were guilty of judging, really, by comparison.

They looked at what they were doing, and they contrasted it in some way with the former magnificence of Solomon's temple. And in their eyes, there was simply no comparison.

This new temple would never, ever be like the old one. They compared the present very unfavorably with the past.

And this kind of talk was very discouraging to those who heard it. It cast them down. They became despondent. This is no good. We'll never—this is—we're achieving nothing.

[7 : 34] This is never going to be what it once was. I think we need always to be aware of the danger of comparing ourselves to others, past or present.

Such an attitude can be very detrimental to God's work. When we think that we are nothing, we are powerless, we are insignificant, we are worthless compared with others.

We look back at great times, perhaps in the history of our nation's church, and we think, well, we'll never be like that again.

It can be quite depressing. Or maybe we can be guilty, and I've seen this happen over the years. People become always comparing themselves with others.

Just look at that church, or that family, or that couple, or those Christians. They have it all together. What faith they display, what resources they have, how blessed they are.

[8 : 40] Unfavorable comparisons can be hugely destructive in the Christian life, because the truth is, we don't always know what God is doing in the lives of others.

And so here, the cold rain of discouragement seeping into the muscles and bones of those working on the temple. How does God respond? Well, through the prophet Haggai, he once more speaks his word.

The word of the Lord, verse 1, came through the prophet Haggai. God brings to them a word of great encouragement.

That's one of the great purposes of God's word to the people of God. It comes to strengthen, inspire, motivate. And the essence of his message we have in verse 4.

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord.

[9 : 47] And so this is the challenge, you see, that Haggai brings before the leaders and the people. Be strong. Now, you might well be saying, well, that's all well and good.

But just exhorting people to be strong, to work hard, doesn't always do the trick, does it? I mean, if you're feeling down and discouraged, sometimes the very last thing you want to hear is someone coming along and telling you to cheer up, be strong.

Exhortations and commands, challenging words on their own do not necessarily make a difference. And yet we would be very much mistaken if all we thought that God was saying here to the people through Haggai was, you lot better pull your socks up and do better.

That is not what is happening here. You know, sometimes, you know, ministers can be tempted, you know, to take out the big stick and to beat everybody over the head. I don't mean literally, but that kind of ministry can be very dangerous and damaging. And that is not what we're seeing here. The verses that follow, we see, yes, we see God prodding His people into action, but He's doing that by way of His promises.

[11:11] He strengthens or comforts His people by giving them here three great promises. Here is why they can be strong and courageous.

Here is why they can rise up and get busy in the work of the Lord. And the first promise here, verses 4 and 5, I think is the promise of God's presence.

Be strong, declares the Lord. I work for, I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts. According to the covenant I made with you when you came out of Egypt, my spirit remains in your midst, fear not. The promise of God's presence. The people, yes, they've been guilty, perhaps, of comparing the present sorry state of the temple with the great glories of the past.

But what God does through His prophet here is point them back not to past memories. Rather, He points them back to past promises.

[12:21] We all know from our own experience, I suspect, that in some situations, the presence of another person can make a huge difference to us.

That's especially perhaps true at a time of fear and anxiety, just knowing there's somebody with us. Perhaps we go to a doctor's appointment, or we go to receive test results, or maybe we're going somewhere we've never been before, maybe in a strange country, and we draw strength and encouragement from their presence alongside us.

The presence of another can change our whole attitude and demeanor, can bring us a sense of confidence and assurance. And that's kind of what's happening here. God is reminding the people that He will be with them, whatever they have to face and whatever they have to undertake.

Work for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts. My spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. The reference here is, of course, to the Exodus, the children of Israel coming out of Egypt.

They faced a very difficult, daunting task. And the language actually echoes that of Deuteronomy 31, verse 6. There we read, Be strong and courageous.

[13:48] Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. So, the people here in Haggai's day, they've been through, many of them, the experience of exile.

It appeared in the exile that God had abandoned them. But no, God's covenant promises are sure and steadfast. That great pillar of God's promise to His people had not been toppled.

It remained standing still and standing tall. God Himself had been at work in the experience of exile. And so now, He once again reminds His people that He will be with them to dwell in their midst. The temple may well still lie in ruins, but nonetheless, God Himself is with His people.

So, one of the reasons that they could be strong and courageous is because they're not on their own. They are not cast upon their own resources, but on the great and adequate resources of their covenant God.

[14:58] God was with them. He would give them all that they need, including the strength and the desire to do the work. The Westminster Confession of Faith says of believers, their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.

And what was true for them is true for us. How often we can be tempted to, you know, become paralyzed, discouraged by fears of one kind or another.

Fear of the future. Fear of what are other people going to say about us. Fear of loss, fear of death, fear of witnessing. But don't you remember God has conquered all these foes and fears?

He has delivered us in the gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ. He has redeemed us and set us free. He's broken into our lives.

He's come to dwell in our midst and to be our God. And that's why, for example, at the end of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus gives what we know as sometimes as the great commission to the disciples, He sends them out into the world.

[16:11] What does He say to them? Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. And friends, that's something we need to do again and again and again as the Lord's people.

We need to go back to the promises of God, to remember that we are His covenant people. He has pledged Himself towards us with these amazing promises.

And on the cross itself, Jesus Christ has written, if I can put it this way, a covenant of grace in the indelible ink of His own blood.

And do you know what it says? It says, I love you with an everlasting love. It says, you will be mine forever. And whatever happens, I will be with you.

He is the God who watches over us, our going out and our coming in. He's the God who sees us and who knows us and who's with us.

[17 : 14] Old Puritan homes often had an embroidery hanging on the wall. Thou, God, seest me. His eyes are upon us as a lover upon the beloved.

He's the God who sees His people, sees us in our troubles, in our failures, in our weakness, sees us in the mess that we sometimes make of our lives.

He sees us and He cares for us. Perhaps like the people of Haggai's day, we feel down and discouraged. Surrounded by a hostile world.

Surrounded by all manner of enemies and opponents. And sometimes we can feel that God has deserted us. Or things will never be like the good old days.

We think our efforts are going to be in vain. We're tempted to throw in the towel. Friends, what can keep us standing in such days when the enemy comes in like a flood?

[18 : 22] What can keep us persevering in the way of faith? What can strengthen us and embolden our witness? It is the very presence of God Himself. The God who sees, the God who loves, the God who cares.

And so we need, all of us, we need to remember and cling to those great and wonderful promises that God has made to us. Our covenant God who has said to us, I am with you.

Not some of the time. I am with you always. Nothing beats His presence with His people.

And how often we need to hear that again and again and again. The promise here of God's presence. Then secondly, the promise of God's purpose in verses 6 through 9.

And so, these words that follow, outline God's purpose for this new temple.

[19 : 55] In a short while, He will shake heaven and earth, sea, dry land, shake all the nations of the world. And the language used here is that of an earthquake or an earth tremor.

The whole earth shaking and moving. I don't know, maybe some of you have experienced an earthquake, and that's a pretty frightening thing to go through. The earth's stability disrupted by great, powerful forces at work in the earth's crust.

And that's what's being conveyed here. God is going to shake the nations. He's going to bring dramatic change. And in fact, the language He uses here, used here by Haggai, is used elsewhere in the Old Testament.

And it's used often in the context of warfare. It's the language of battle and conflict. We saw that terminology used by Deborah in the book of Judges, by David in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

It was used of great, significant events in the history of God's people. When the nations around seemed to have the upper hand, looked as if they would crush and destroy the people of God, then God would come to their aid, really, as a divine warrior, the God of battles.

[21 : 09] And He would defend His people from attack by dramatic and unusual manifestations of His power. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews talks about God shaking the heavens and the earth.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe. You see, the movements of this world, which men and women lay so much store by, will actually come to nothing.

They will disappear. The powerful kingdoms of men and women will crumble and fall. Only the kingdom that God is building is going to last.

You'll notice here that God shakes the nations. He says that the treasures of all the nations will come and fill this house with glory. People from all nations coming into the house of God, bringing with them worship and tribute to the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

The nations will come and empty their pockets, says Haggai, and fill this house with glory. It's an absolutely amazing picture.

[22 : 37] These beleaguered saints, despondent, in Jerusalem, facing an uncertain future, little money, perhaps, or resources, and yet, a despised minority.

In human terms, their task, a hopeless one. And yet, God speaks to them and tells them one day that the building, that the temple they are building, into it will stream all the nations of the world,

bringing great riches and wealth.

Silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. Our God is not one who wants for resources. A greater glory is to come, one that will put Solomon and his temple in the shade.

God is reminding them that He is establishing an unshakable kingdom, that He is at work in their building of the temple.

Do you see what He's doing? He's reminding them that what they are doing is part and parcel of God's overarching purpose.

[23 : 53] There's a famous story, often beloved of preachers, of the days when Sir Christopher Wren was building St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and on one occasion, he was making a tour of the work that was in progress, and he came upon a man at work, and he asked him, what are you doing?

And the man said, I'm cutting this stone to a certain size and shape. He then came to a second man and asked him what he was doing. The man said, I'm working hard to earn money at my work.

He came to a third man, and he asked him what he was doing. The man paused for a moment, straightened himself, and answered, I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build St. Paul's Cathedral. Perspective is important. What are we doing in church? Helping with teas and coffees, we're painting the kitchen, teaching the children, offering hospitality, giving our tithes, saying our prayers, sharing faith with others.

But in all these things, we are part of something much greater. We're part of the ever-advancing kingdom of God. We're part of the growing church of God.

[25 : 07] We're part of the fruitful gospel of God. And you see, this despised temple of Haggai's day was in fact the beginning, a sense of God's great kingdom. And the truth is this, that we don't know what God will do with our work and service.

It may seem small. It may seem insignificant. But it is all being built into part of God's unshakable kingdom. And it's very important that we have that perspective in public worship.

You know, this is a dress rehearsal for heaven. One day we will be lost in wonder, love, and praise in our praying for others. An unseen work.

It's not flashy. It's not showy. Yet wonderfully, amazingly, God uses our prayers to bring people to faith. Faithful living for God in a difficult place.

Work, education. Who knows how God might use your testimony? And the truth is that none of us know what God will do.

[26 : 18] with what we offer Him. But in His grace and mercy, He may choose to magnify it and brush it with His glory.

Remember the promise of God's presence. Remember the promise of God's purpose. Finally, and as time disappears, the promise of God's peace.

Right at the end there. And in this place, verse 9, I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. And with this fractured, discordant world, God has promised to bring peace.

He will shake the nations in judgment, and peace will reign. Remember Isaiah's famous words, He shall judge between the nations and decide disputes for many peoples.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war, any war.

[27 : 29] And Haggai's contemporary, Zechariah, he spoke of the day when the Messiah would come and put down His enemies and bring security and peace to the Lord's people. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, Zechariah 9.10, the war horse from Jerusalem, the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations.

His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. And Haggai says here, in this place, I will give peace.

Here is the promised peace of the great day of the Lord. God has promised it, and God has secured it. Because the amazing thing is we can enter into and enjoy something of this peace now, today, in our own lives.

Because in that very temple in which Haggai was speaking about, Jesus Christ wrought peace with God. This was the temple to which Jesus was taken as a young boy.

This was the temple out of which He drove the moneylenders. This was the temple in whose courts He taught. This was the temple where the curtain before the Holy of Holies was torn in two at His death.

[28 : 46] And as Corrie was reminding us a few weeks ago in the morning, that curtain was no flimsy piece of material. Thick, heavy, and substantial. Almost like a wall.

Separating people from the presence of God. At the very moment of Jesus' death on the cross, that massive curtain was ripped from top to bottom, torn asunder, the barrier gone, so that through faith in a crucified Savior, you and me can come to God.

And that way is open, you see, for people of every tribe and nation and language to come into a relationship with the living God.

On Calvary's cross, Jesus blazed a path into God's presence, drenched in His own blood. And so this poor house of Haggai's day would indeed see a greater glory.

It would see one greater than Solomon appear and walk within its walls, one who would be known as the Prince of Peace, one who would come on that first Easter as a pure, spotless lamb prepared for sacrifice, to bring to guilty sinners like us peace with God.

[30 : 16] And all of that temple's sacrificial system found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and in Him crucified. The blood of animals was unworthy and powerless to achieve.

Jesus accomplished by sacrificing Himself on the altar of Calvary. And many today are searching for peace, for peace, peace from a guilty conscience, peace from a troubled mind, peace amid the cares and worries of this life, peace in the face of the inevitability of death and judgment.

But friends, you can never have peace outside of Jesus Christ. His is a peace that passes all understanding. He alone is our peace with God.

And through faith in Him we can come to know and experience something of that last day peace in the very here and now. Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace, over all victorious in its bright increase.

Perfect yet it floweth fuller every day. Perfect yet it groweth deeper all the way. Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blessed, finding as He promised, perfect peace and rest.

[31 : 47] Jesus Christ is our peace. By faith He has us in His everlasting arms, and He will never let us go.

He will never let us in His presence. Therefore, whatever He has called us to, to serve Him, in whatever way that is, we can be strong and courageous.

God speaks a word of comfort to His weary people. The promise of His presence, the promise of His purpose, the promise of His peace.

And we stand today on the other side of those great promises in a sense. Paul tells us that all the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus Christ.

So maybe, maybe you're feeling down and discouraged this evening. Maybe you're struggling for motivation. Maybe you're finding that the going is tough.

[32 : 47] But friends, let's remember that we worship and serve a God who always keeps His promises. He can always be trusted, even in the most difficult and trying of circumstances.

He can be trusted because He has kept His most difficult to keep promise of all. He did not spare even His own Son, but gave Him up for us all.

And if He did not withhold His own Son from us, then what will He keep from us that we really need?

What have I to dread? What have I to fear? Leaning on the everlasting arms. I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.

come and lean upon those arms this evening. Know His peace and experience His comfort. Let's pray together.

[33 : 55] Lord, we pray that You, by Your Holy Spirit, would prompt us and prod us into action as we reflect on Your wonderful promises to us.

That promise that You will always be with us and that You will never leave us. And indeed, that nothing can separate us from Your love in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

From the promise of Your purpose that we are caught up in. Lord, we often feel weak and tired and useless. Lord, give us a proper perspective that we see that what we are doing is actually part of something much bigger, much greater, and far more wonderful.

And Lord, remind us afresh of that promise of peace that is ours in Jesus Christ. Peace that this world can never give and a peace that can never be taken from us.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.