

Three Things to Consider

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[0 : 00] Let's read God's word together from the Old Testament, from the prophet Haggai, chapter 2, verses 10 to 19, and we'll read God's word. On the 24th day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ask the priests about the law.

If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priest answered and said, no. Then Haggai said, if someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?

The priest answered and said, it does become unclean. Then Haggai answered and said, so it is with this people and with this nation before me, declares the Lord. And so with every work of their hands and what they offer there is unclean. Now then consider from this day onward before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord.

How did you fare? When one came to a heap of 20 measures, there were but 10. When one came to the wine vat to draw 50 measures, there were but 20.

I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail. Yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord. Consider this, consider from this day onward.

[1 : 22] From the 24th day of the ninth month. Since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider is the seed yet in the barn. Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded nothing.

But from this day on, I will bless you. This is God's holy word. We turn this evening to that passage that Corey read for us, Haggai chapter 2, verses 10 through 19.

It used to be said that the manoeuvre most likely to fail those sitting their driving test was the three-point turn.

One of my brothers, who is a driving instructor, tells me that the three-point turn is, however, no longer part of the test. I'm not sure of the rationale behind its removal, but I think it was included because of many roads in the UK.

It's just not possible to do a UE, a U-turn, and just wheel the car around. In some circumstances, because of the narrowness of the road, a three-point turn.

[2 : 34] Sometimes it can be a four-point turn, a five-point turn, a seven-point turn. It needs to be attempted. And it's a manoeuvre, if you're a driver, that you'll know requires a degree of precision, patience, to accomplish it successfully.

And if you're driving, I know a lot of people drive an automatic, but if you're driving a manual, you've really got to work hard not to stall the car. And here in the book of Haggai, we've seen that the prophet has been encouraging the leaders and the people to kind of make a turnaround.

Through the prophet, God is seeking to restore the glory of His name in the midst of His people. And He's urged them on a path of repentance. But if I can put it this way, this process has turned out to be more of a three-point turn than a simple U-turn.

And that turning around, if you've been here with us over the last few weeks, began with Haggai's sermon on the first day of the sixth month, 520 BC. And in that sermon, the Word of God really stopped the people in their tracks.

And God challenged them. He convicted them of their apathy and their indifference, in particular to the rebuilding and the reestablishing of God's temple.

[4 : 01] And the people were stirred up to recommit themselves to that important work. However, just a few weeks of starting that work, discouragement set in.

And again, Haggai came to the people with the Word of God. This time, the 21st day of the seventh month. And that occasion, he brought a message of encouragement.

He assured them that the Lord was with them. And he shared with them a vision of future glory and peace. He wanted them to press on in the work and not to throw in the towel.

And this evening, we turn to the third of Haggai's sermons that are recorded for us, given on the 24th day of the ninth month.

We read of that in verse 10. The date is calculated, the 18th of December, 520 BC. And twice in this section, you'll notice that the prophet uses the phrase, consider, or some translations, give careful thought.

[5 : 11] We have that in verse 15 and 18. And it's a phrase that's already been used in chapter 1, verse 5, and verse 7. And it's clear that Haggai wants the people to stop and to think about how they're living their lives.

He doesn't want this repentance, this turnaround, to stall. He wants the people to move forward in faith, in the right direction, towards the rich blessing that God has in store for them.

And so, in order for that to happen, the prophet in this sermon highlights, I think, three things that he wants them to give careful thought to.

And the first of these is to do, once again, with worship. Consider the worship that God requires of His people. We have that in verses, really, verses 11 through 14.

The previous weeks, the people had been working on the temple, seeking to put public worship back at the center of their lives and their community.

[6 : 26] A noble enterprise. A good thing. And yet, there were dangers associated with it. And one of the dangers was that they were engaged in this work without them, in their hearts, being really given over to God.

There was a lot of hard work, but not much real worship. They were just going through the motions. They were not yet focused on what it meant to be a holy people.

The Holy One of Israel was not at the center of their lives. And so, we discover Haggai, in this oracle, in this sermon, in this address, he begins really with a kind of, I suppose, a bit like a Q&A; with the priests who were teachers of the law.

And so, he says, Thus says the Lord of hosts, ask the priests about the law. And so, what he's doing is directing the people back to the law of God, back to the Word of God.

And many of the laws were taken up with issues of holiness and purity. These were indicators to the people that, you know, God could not just be approached in any old way.

[7 : 42] Worship is a serious matter. It's a serious business. God is holy, and His people are called to holiness also. You shall be holy, for I am holy.

And in the Old Testament, these holiness regulations that had to be adhered to, well, Haggai asks a question about them, and we have it in verse 12.

If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, touches with his fold, bread or stew, wine, oil, any kind of food, does it become holy? And the priests answer, no.

They don't hesitate. There's not any debate. There's not any discussion. No. And the point that Haggai appears to be making here is that holiness is not contagious.

It's not transferable. If we had a, I don't know, a primary four class full of healthy children, and into that class we placed another child who had, for example, chicken pox.

[8 : 51] Would the child with the chicken pox become healthy and well because of their contact with the healthy, uninfected children? No.

Of course not. He or she would not become well through contact with others who are well. And that's kind of the point that he's making here. Placing unconsecrated, uncommitted people in an environment where they will come into contact with others who are committed to God will automatically make them committed to God.

Holiness and consecration to God is not contagious in that sense. And then Haggai said in verse 13, if someone who's unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean?

The priest answers and said, it does become unclean. And Haggai answered and said, so it is with this people and with this nation before me, declares the Lord. And so with every work of their hands and what they offer there is unclean.

So another question about uncleanness and defilement. And once again, it's a question about the ritual law. Holiness, consecration is not contagious.

[10:03] Defilement and uncleanness is. Again, the example of a child with chicken pox going into the classroom of healthy children. What happens? Of course, the infected child does not pick up the health of others, but they pick up the infection from the child with the chicken pox.

It's the same principle. We sometimes talk about one rotten apple spoiling the whole barrel. The rottenness, the decay is contagious. And this appears to have been the situation in Haggai's day. The fact that the people's hearts were not fully given to the Lord meant all that they did was in some sense defiled. They were defiling the temple with unclean hearts and minds because their hearts were far away from God.

Their religious worship was infected with that same kind of spirit. Yes, they may well have been doing the right kinds of things, but what they were offering to God was not acceptable worship. Their heart wasn't in it. There's a famous passage in the opening chapter of Isaiah where God says, Stop bringing meaningless offerings.

[11:11] Your incense is detestable to me. New moon Sabbaths and convocations. I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

They've become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. So there's the worship that God cannot bear to witness or hear.

Perfectly possible to have the right forms and phrases and words, and yet our hearts can be given over to idols. We can have lively and engaging worship, tremendous singing, great enthusiasm, and yet in our hearts we can be living in a way that is disobedient to God, that disregards His law and His commandments and His word.

And so God is speaking to the people through Haggai and pointing out to them that the fact that they were trying to rebuild the temple wasn't actually transforming them into a holy people.

You know, there's an old saying, you know, being brought up in a garage doesn't make you a mechanic. One doesn't follow the other. And here the people's worship was unclean.

[12:31] It was defiled. Their misplaced priorities infected everything that they were doing. Their focus was all wrong. And sometimes if something's off, even just a little, it can cause hugely destructive problems.

You know, it can happen with a car. It's a problem, just a little thing, you know, maybe a bearing or something. Yet that can have a profound effect on how well the car drives.

It can affect the safety of the passengers. One thing, little thing is wrong. You know, I attempt to play golf. Well, one little thing wrong in that golf swing. Well, in my case, there's a lot of things wrong in my golf swing, but that's another matter.

But it only takes one little thing. Sometimes you see the top golfers in the world, one little thing, and yet the ball's going everywhere. And it's the same in the life of faith.

If worshiping God isn't our delight, our pleasure, if God's not number one, if we're not enjoying Him, everything else is going to be off, out of kilter.

[13:41] I think from a New Testament perspective, this is why our union with Jesus Christ is so vitally important, because He alone is the truly Holy One.

The incarnate Son of God is the only absolutely holy person to ever walk this earth. And in the gospel, God calls us into union with Him.

And therefore, it's only out of that relationship that a likeness to Christ and a life of holiness can even begin to emerge. And the laws, these Old Testament laws and regulations, all of these were pointing towards Him.

After His appearing, they became redundant and obsolete. You see, there is no holiness apart from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I came across this passage in, pardon me, J.C. Ryle. He says this, I pity those who try to be holy without Christ. Your labor is all in vain.

[14:46] You're putting money in a bag with holes. You're pouring water into a sieve. You are rolling a huge round stone uphill. You're building up a wall with untempered mortar.

Believe me, you're beginning at the wrong end. You must come to Christ first, and He shall give you His sanctifying Spirit. Let me ask you tonight, do you know anything of the work of the sanctifying Spirit in your heart?

Are you worshipping the Lord? Have you an appetite for God? Are you happy to spread out your needs before Him in prayer? How much does public worship matter to you? Sometimes it astonishes me at how casual and dismissive some professing Christians are to the means of grace. A take-it-or-leave-it attitude is often a sign of deep spiritual malaise. Yes, the worship of God involves outward form and ritual, but true worship involves more than that. It's an all-consuming thing. It's always a matter of the heart and soul.

[16:00] It's internal as well as external. Consider your ways. Don't just go through the motions. Consider the worship that God is looking for.

And then secondly here, consider the discipline that God sends in verses 15 through 17. Now then, consider from this day onward, before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare?

When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I struck you. And all the products of your toil, with blight, with mildew, and with hail.

And yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord. So, hi guys, asking the people to consider how things have been for them in the land. It's not a story of abundant blessing and fruitfulness.

It's quite the reverse. Life has been hard for these returning exiles. Poor harvest, crop failures, extreme weather, all had contributed to economic hardship.

[17:09] Hard times for all. And we noted previously that these hardships should have been assigned to the people that there was something wrong. Deuteronomy 28.

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. And that chapter then continues in verse 15.

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. You see, the hardship of the people that they were experiencing was not to be understood as a kind of accident of nature.

[18:07] They were to understand it as a judgment, as a discipline of God. God was seeking to discipline His people, to waken them up. And He'd spelled out to His people in Deuteronomy 28, the dire consequences of unbelief.

God had done that because He wanted them to be faithful and obedient to them. He desired their love and affection. Now, of course, we need to be careful with any text like this.

Not all hardship or difficulty can be attributed to God's disciplining of His people. Take the example of persecution. The hardships, the privations associated with it.

They often come upon believers not as the result of unfaithfulness, but rather faithfulness to the Lord. And similarly, when bad things happen in our lives, it's not necessarily down to sinful rebellion.

We have to be very careful. Hugely dangerous to attribute all illness or hardship or difficulty that people come to experience as being due to a sin or a lack of faith.

[19:16] Beware those who so easily and readily make such claims. Very dangerous. There is often a mystery to the providence of God, and discipline is not God's only purpose in adversity.

But that being said, sometimes God does bring hard things into our lives to wake us up from our spiritual slumbers. C.S. Lewis famously wrote, Suffering is God's warning signal to us.

It reminds us that this life isn't everything. Suffering and hardship encourage us to look to the living God and to put our faith and trust in Him. He is the one from whom our help comes.

I've noticed that over the years, suffering and painful experiences tend to have two effects. Either hearts become hard and brittle and seemingly impervious to God's Word as people turn away from God, reject Him, or hearts are softened and become sensitive and receptive to God's Word.

Either these things you see are driving us closer to God, or they are moving us further away. So let me ask you tonight, if you are going through a hard time, what is actually going on in your heart?

[20:54] Are you being drawn closer to the Lord, or are you actually drifting away from Him? What have you given your heart to?

Proverbs 4.23, Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Jesus said, Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Where is your treasure? If suffering comes, if hardship comes, that's a call to consider our ways. So, consider the worship that God requires, consider the discipline that God sends. Thirdly here, consider the hope that God brings in verses 18 and 19.

Consider, from this day onward, from the 24th day of the ninth month, since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn?

[21 : 51] Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on, I will bless you.

Here again is God's gracious promise to His people, I'm going to bless you. I'm going to turn this situation around. Now, obviously, this promise is given to the people in a very specific situation. God very directly promises to bless them. They had previously been under a curse. Now, blessing was on its way for sure.

And so, He's giving to the people hope for the future. The seed had been sown to little effect. Vine, fig tree, pomegranate, olive, these things, these fruits, they'd yielded not little.

Actually, He says, they'd yielded nothing. It was a dire situation. But it's at this low point that God speaks, that God moves, that God intervenes.

[23 : 00] It's often when things are at their darkest that He shines His light. He speaks and brings to His despairing people this word of hope and blessing.

Often, it's when people have given up on themselves or reached that point of desperation that they discover that their only help is in the name of the Lord.

It's here when things seemingly cannot get any worse that God's grace meets and restores them.

Reminder of a story Martin Lloyd-Jones recounts in his book on preaching, preaching and preachers, a great book.

And through the book, he tells some stories and anecdotes of his life and ministry. And there's one where he, I could have paraphrased it, but I'll just read it, I think.

He says this, I knew a poor man being converted from a terrible life and sin who'd become a fine Christian. That was when I was in South Wales. But afterwards, unfortunately, for various reasons, this poor fellow had become a backslider, fallen very deeply into sin, run away from his wife and children to live with another woman.

[24 : 17] They'd come to London, and there he'd lived in sin, squandered his money. He'd actually gone home and told his wife a lie in order to get further money out of her. The house in which they lived was in their joint names, but he got this changed, put into his name.

Then he sold it in order to get the money. He'd gone very, thus very, very far into the far country, sinned terribly. Now the money had finished.

The woman had deserted him. He was utterly miserable and ashamed. And so he solemnly decided to commit suicide, feeling that in his deep state of repentance, God would forgive him.

But he could not forgive himself. He felt that he had no right ever to approach his family again. And so he decided to walk to Westminster Bridge, throw himself into the Thames.

And he was actually on his way to do this. And just as the poor soul arrived at the bridge, Big Ben struck half past six, 6.30. And suddenly a thought flashed into his mind.

[25 : 20] He said to himself, referring to me, he will now just be entering his pulpit for the evening service. And so he decided that he would come and listen to me once more before he put an end to his life.

He made his way into Westminster Chapel in about six minutes, got through the front door, walked up the stairs, was just entering the gallery when he heard these words, God have mercy on the backslider.

I uttered that petition in my prayer. And they were literally the first words he heard. Everything was put right immediately. And he was restored.

Friends, there is hope. There is blessing in the gospel of Jesus Christ, even for the vilest of offenders. None are too far gone that his arm cannot reach.

And so tonight, whoever you are and whenever, whatever you find yourself, let me tell you, there is hope. There is hope in the gospel.

[26 : 26] There is hope in Christ. There is hope for sinners. And sometimes people can get in a very low place indeed, submerged in guilt and shame and fear, and there appears to be absolutely no way out, no hope.

And yet it's often here at the very bottom when folks can get no lower, that God in his grace reaches out his hand of mercy. I recall the story of Corrie Ten Boom in the Netherlands, Second World War. She and her sister Betsy, prisoned by the Nazis, trying to rescue Jewish citizens, eventually incarcerated in the Ravensbrook concentration camp. Brutal conditions, abusive guards, murder of fellow prisoners.

And yet these two sisters ministered to others and shared the gospel. They had a little, small, smuggled Bible in the camp.

And yet as many prisoners came to Christ, Corrie's sister Betsy fell ill. And in her great frailty and weakness, and on her deathbed, she took her sister Corrie by the hand, and she told her this, tell people what we have learned here.

[27 : 47] There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper still. Friends, maybe that's a word for someone here tonight.

Perhaps you've dug a pit of your own making through your sinfulness and selfishness. Or maybe someone else has dug that pit and cast you into it.

Yet remember this tonight. There is no pit, no sin, no situation, no hole so deep that Christ is not deeper still.

Maybe this evening God is speaking into the apparent hopelessness, despair even, of your own situation. And he's saying, I will bless you and I will use you and we're to restore you.

Because here's the God who brings hope even to his faithless people. Here's the God who removes the curse to bring abundant blessings.

[28 : 56] Indeed, is this not what the Lord's table proclaims to us? That the great curse of sin has been lifted through Jesus' death on the cross, that we might come to know God and enjoy his blessings forevermore.

And so there's hope here wrapped up in this prophecy, ancient prophecy of Haggai, given the 18th of December, 520 B.C. And the prophecy is a bit like an engagement ring.

It's a pledge of all that is to come. And the blessing, you'll notice it here, promised to those of Haggai's days, was an unashamedly material one.

The seeds, the vines, the trees that brought forth nothing were going to be fruitful again. God was going to turn what had become a wilderness into a veritable garden.

That's an important thing for us to underline. Corey was reminding of us of this this morning. The Christian hope is unashamedly physical and material.

[30 : 02] It's not something vague and ethereal. It's not clouds and harps. It's not insubstantial. It's something real and tangible. As Christians, we believe in what?

We believe in the resurrection of the body. The Christian hope is not to die and go to heaven, but to die and be with the Lord. Our hope is in Him.

Our hope is not for some vague disembodied existence. It's for new resurrection bodies. Our hope is for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. And so, these material blessings and hope given to the people of Haggai's day are really a pledge of what God will one day do when the curse is finally lifted.

He's going to usher a new world in a new world. Revelation 22. John writes, No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him.

They will see His face, His name will be on their foreheads, and night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

[31 : 17] It's a picture of a new Eden. The curse gone, God's throne established for all to see, abundant life and healing for the nations now flourishes, where before there was only death, decay, frustration.

Before there was rebellion, now there's worship and service. Before people could not see God's face and live, now they can, His face can be seen, and His face can be gazed at in wonder, love, and praise.

We sometimes sing, don't we, that hymn, Joy to the World. We usually sing it in Advent. Actually, it's about a hymn about the second coming. What will happen when the Messiah comes in power and majesty and glory?

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.

There's the hope that God brings to us through the prophet Haggai. It's something so real that one day you'll be able to touch it and smell it and taste it.

[32 : 29] In keeping with His promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, says Peter. Paul says, no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him.

And so friends, through faith in Jesus Christ, we have a truth that towers above all the wickedness and evil in this world. We have a hope that has swallowed up all our sins and drawn even death sting.

Martin Luther famously called the Christian life a life of repentance. And with the Spirit's help, it is a life of constantly turning from self and sin and turning to God.

It is one big U-turn. Repentance is not simply a one-off action. It's a way of life. It's a mindset. And as Corey reminded us this morning, our repentance is never perfect.

It's never complete. But it can be real. It can be genuine. That's why the Lord's Supper is so vital to the health and well-being of God's people.

[33 : 39] Because here we meet with Jesus. Here our eyes are opened. Here at the Lord's table, Christ himself draws near to woo us back to himself. And here's the reason that defiled, unclean sinners like us can come into the presence of a holy God.

We have a crucified and risen Savior. And tonight, we come to the table of the one who has borne the curse of our sin. We come to the one in whom there is the promise of untold blessing.

As Corey was preaching this morning, I was thinking of that great communion hymn of Horatius Bonner. Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face.

Here would we touch and handle things unseen. Here grasp with firmer hand eternal grace. And all my weariness upon thee lean.

The worship God requires, may he be first in our affections. The discipline God sends, may it soften our hearts. The hope God brings, may he prepare us for that great tomorrow when in Christ all things shall be made new.

[34 : 58] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that though you are a God of holiness and perfection, a God whose eyes are purer than to behold iniquity, yet you have provided a way for us through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that we might meet with you, that we might encounter you, and that we might be changed by you.

And by your Holy Spirit. Lord, bless us and encourage us. Meet with us and speak to us as we turn from your written word to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Meet with us there around this table and do us good, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.