

# **HAGGAI**

*‘Because of My House’*

Studies in  
the Restoration of the  
Church

*Haggai is a book about the people of God. It is not primarily about our individual walk with God, but has much to say about our walk with God as his people together. I believe that the message of this book is truly prophetic for the present time, as we live in a time when the Lord wants to see the Church standing in even greater glory than it had when it was first brought into existence. Remember that the New Testament speaks of the Church as being the temple of the Lord, the place where he dwells visibly!*

# 1. A Matter of Timing

## Haggai 1:1-4

The people thought that there was a time when the house of the Lord should be rebuilt: they were right! It seems that there was no doubt in their minds of the fact that it needed to be rebuilt, it was just that now was not the right time, they thought: they were wrong! An edict had been issued sixteen years earlier and work had only stopped because of opposition and discouragement (**Ezra 4**). In the meantime, they thought they could hide behind the spiritual-sounding argument that it was not yet the Lord's appointed time for the rebuilding to take place. Perhaps they were not even prepared to admit openly that this was how they were thinking ... maybe this is why it needed a word from the Lord to reveal it!

All Christians know that the Lord Jesus wants all his people to be united, to be built together (**Ephesians 2:20-22**). There is no doubt in most of our minds of the great need: the problem is that it seems impossible at this time, so we tell ourselves that this is not the time: we are wrong! We allow the priorities to shift, and fool ourselves that the way of things will continue as it has done for years (**2 Peter 3:3&4**). God is doing something, NOW! It may need a direct word from the Lord to reveal to us the truth behind our spiritual facade.

The Lord called their bluff. "All right then, if you are so keen on knowing my timing, is this the right time for each of you to be living in his own fine house, when my house is in ruins?" They had spent time and money to make their own houses just as good as they could; their priorities were clearly visible in the quality of finish in every part of them.

It is too easy for us to look at this story and assume that the challenge is just one of materialism and selfishness, that our response should be to live simply with the bare necessities and channel as many as possible of our resources into what God is doing. I certainly would not argue with that goal but I believe God is saying much more.

The Jews **were** materialistic and self-centred, but they had a more fundamental problem: they had lost sight of what God was doing in their situation. They had seen great blessing; God had brought them out of slavery to a foreign power, out of exile and into the land which was theirs because of his great love for them and grace to them. They had been determined to enjoy their inheritance, and had been fiercely possessive and nationalistic about it. When they had first started rebuilding the temple, they had refused any help from anyone who was not a Jew (see **Ezra 4: 1-3**). But now they had totally lost interest.

## 2. Taking Stock

### Haggai 1:5-6

But what was the purpose of their returning to their inheritance in the first place? Look in **2 Chronicles 36:22&23** and **Ezra 1**. (If you want to look further back, look at **Jeremiah chapters 29-31**.) Cyrus (the king of Persia) had given a proclamation that the temple of God was to be (re)built in Jerusalem. It was for this reason that he allowed any of the Jews who wanted to return to Jerusalem. They made a great start in **Ezra 3**. They were united in their vision and work - until they met opposition and discouragement! So, now the Lord says to them "Give careful thought to your ways!"

They had become accustomed to their way of life, they had dropped into a routine. Now he asked them to look closely at the pattern and direction of their lives ... what was going on?

What they could see in their lives was not very pleasant. Nothing very terrible, nothing scandalous, but it was the sort of thing we do not like to look at or talk about with others: **frustration, failure, lack of fulfilment!** They worked hard in the fields and sowed generously. Quite reasonably they expected a good harvest, but it didn't come. They had just about enough of all the essentials of life, but not enough to enjoy. They were back in the promised land, but it was not flowing with milk and honey. Not surprising that they needed a command from the Lord before they would dare to be honest about their condition!

Does this sound familiar? A life of **existence rather than abundance?** 'Getting by' rather than making real progress? Living, knowing that you are in the Lord's family, but not really seeing the benefits? Feeling let down that the Christian life was supposed to be a lot more wonderful than this? Angry with God that he seems to have cheated you, denied you the blessings he promised? Frustrated by the sense of just paddling in the shallows of a vast ocean, knowing that you are surviving on subsistence rations when there is a feast ready spread for you?

It is important to stop here if you need to. Take as long as you need to be completely honest with yourself. The Lord is not using empty words when he says "**Give careful thought to your ways**". Please listen to his voice.

### **3. The Cause of the Problem**

#### **Haggai 1:7-11**

Having given careful thought to your ways, now take action! Not before! This is one reason why it is vital to have taken time to take stock before moving on. The action which the Lord required of the Jews was that they should move out of their cosy and comfortable routine and actually start to do something about the command to rebuild the House of God for the pleasure and glory of God. With the command, he gives the explanation for the problems that they have been experiencing: **HIMSELF!**

No wonder every best plan that they laid had gone wrong; no surprise that their crops had all but failed and their food supply was meagre; that wine was scarce and clothing was poor ... God himself was frustrating their plans! He was standing in their way because they had neglected his priority and substituted their own individual ambitions. God's house remained a ruin while each one was busy with (literally, 'ran to') his own house. It was for this reason that the harvests had failed and their lives were just about on survival level.

It does not take a wise man to see that there is a dramatic parallel in the present-day Church. We have groups and denominations by the dozen, by the hundreds and thousands. That in itself is not the worst thing: it was not wrong for the Jews to have their own houses and to feel at home in them. They needed shelter whilst the temple was being built, but they got their priorities wrong. What they did wrong was to neglect the house of God by preference of their own houses. Paul was just as clear in his condemnation of this attitude in **1 Corinthians 1:10-13** and **3:1-9,21-23**. The Corinthians were in danger of 'each running to his own house' and making cosy little groups who followed the particular emphasis of one man. Perhaps this lay behind Paul's comments in **1 Corinthians 11:27-32?**

The Lord had removed or reduced 'the staff of life', the basic foods which his people needed to survive, but these were also the stuff of offerings. Although when they had first returned to Jerusalem the people had offered the appropriate sacrifices, there is no indication that they did so any longer. There was no overflow of response to God for what he had given and was continually giving them.

Our basic 'food' is what our Father has given and continually gives us: forgiveness and cleansing through the blood of Jesus; death to sin and the old life through his death; new life in freedom as a result of his resurrection and the Holy Spirit indwelling and poured out as the consequence of his exaltation at the right hand of the Father. Our 'sacrifice' is one that takes

these gifts and offers them back to God in thanks and heartfelt praise for what he has given us (***Psalm 116:12-14,17; Hebrews 13:15***).

Just as the lack of offerings showed the state of the Jews' relationship with God, so a low level of thanksgiving, worship and praise to our Father can mean only one thing: low appreciation of what he has done for us and means to us!

Why do we suffer such a lack of results? Why does our evangelistic 'sowing' produce such a meagre 'subsistence level' harvest? Why are so many Christians 'bumping along the bottom' with little real spiritual food, little joy, little anointing? Why does it seem that God has 'called for a drought' on everything we do? I believe that the Spirit of God is speaking to us to bring the same message as he brought to Haggai and the Jews: "*Give careful thought to your ways. Go ... and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured*".

## 4. Obedience and Blessing

### Haggai 1:12-15

At this point, we step into the future, or at least our future. The only way we can make progress along this path is by crossing the threshold of obedience. As we look into these verses and further on in the book of Haggai, we need to remember that the blessings follow obedience and are conditional upon it ... let us whet our appetites for what God has in store for his Church!

The response and the reason for it are both staggeringly simple: the governor Zerubbabel and the priest Joshua, together with all the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord and recognised his messenger because God had sent him... and the people feared before the Lord. What we really fear is what controls our lives; it establishes our priorities. I do not mean that we are to constantly go around in fear, but rather that we set the direction of our lives, not only by the things we aim to achieve but also by the things we aim to avoid. The Jews now aimed to avoid stepping out of God's will, so they made him their priority. In the simplicity of that response, they had stepped right back into line with the purpose of God. At last he knew that he could begin to accomplish his plans with them! So he told them: "I am with you". Simple, wasn't it?

The effect on the people was electric! The governor, the priest and all the people were so stirred up by this simple word from the Lord that they started work with great enthusiasm. It was not just a superficial enthusiasm, God had stirred up their spirit... something deep and real was happening and it showed as the people came and began work on the temple. God had the partners he needed, just three and a half weeks after starting with a people who just wanted to go their own way. There is hope for us in the Church yet!

## 5. What were they to build?

It was in ruins, but it had been the most amazing building in the world. The riches of many nations had been poured into it; it had certainly been one of the wonders of the world when Solomon had built it, and it had been built for the glory of God, somewhere where his presence would be known and experienced. Look at the first few chapters of **2 Chronicles** or **1 Kings 6-7** for a very full description of all the wealth and work that went into it. The most amazing thing about this house, however, was **the presence of God**. There was something very unusual about this place; it seemed to all observers to carry an awesome supernatural power. This was shown especially by the presence of the ark of the covenant, a very tangible symbol of the covenant relationship between God and mankind.

When Solomon had finished all the building work and was dedicating the temple to the Lord, he prayed a most daring prayer. Read it for yourself in **1 Kings 8** and **2 Chronicles 6**. Although he knows very well that even the whole of the heavens cannot contain God and his glory, Solomon asks the Lord to make this house the place where his name will be, and that the Lord's eyes may be "open toward this house night and day". In effect, he asks God to make the temple a sort of local 'branch office' of the presence of God, a small copy of the heavenly reality (**Hebrews 8:4-5**). What is even more amazing, God set his seal on this request by filling the house with his glory and saying "Now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there for ever, and my eyes and my heart will be there perpetually" (**2 Chronicles 7:16**).

The parallel to the Church is striking. Just one reading of **John 17** gives the same picture: God has committed himself irrevocably to his Church. When we act in the name of Jesus, we carry the local agency for the authority of the Name above all names. Reading in the book of **Acts**, we see the Church acting with that authority and embodying the presence of God in a way that overtakes the awesome wonder of the temple. Here were people who knew the reality of the presence of God and the power of the Name of Jesus. They were ordinary people like us, not a magnificent building, but the Lord made more impact on the world through those few people than through all the riches and wisdom of Solomon, even more than he achieved through the magnificence and awesome presence of Solomon's temple.

They were a people who were being built together from many different backgrounds. Their differences had been abolished through the broken body of the Christ, they were being joined together into one new man, establishing peace together. They were being fitted together in Jesus and

were growing into a holy temple in the Lord (***Ephesians 2:11-22***). There was a much greater impact on the nations of the world through the early Church than was ever seen before or has been since. This was the 'house' in its early glory, as it was designed to be!

## 6. Sharing God's Goals

### Haggai 2:1-9

The people set to work. You can imagine what it was like: great enthusiasm to start with; by about the second week the toughness of the task would begin to sink in; after another week all that was left was a dutiful determination to obey by some and the beginnings of discouragement for others ... just the time for someone to say "You should have seen the house as it was before ... we can never equal that!" From vision to despair in another three and a half weeks! It even affected good old Zerubbabel and Joshua. So the Lord speaks through his prophet again: "All right! Stand up everyone who knows what the temple used to look like! What does it look like now? Rubbish, isn't it? **BUT NOW be strong ... all you people of the land,**" declares the Lord, "and work. For I am with you," declares the Lord, The Lord Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. (\*) And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear." Great! Just the message they needed to hear; when discouragement had set in and there were those who doubted whether God really was with them, another (very simple) word from the Lord to confirm that this was what he wanted to do, and that they should get on with it!

(\*) To see what the Lord had covenanted with the Jews when they came out of Egypt, see ***Exodus 19:3-6 & 33:14-17***.

But he did much more ... he goes on to say that the glory of this pile of ruins, once rebuilt, will be greater than the glory the original house had when it was newly built by Solomon! Here was God's plan with the veil pulled back a bit more. How could anything be greater than the glory of that house? Why, the wealth of many nations was poured into it in the reign of the most magnificently rich King Solomon! How could this work of theirs, in this forgotten corner of a mighty empire, even begin to match up to that great glory? But God said it would be so. He also said that, once more, he would shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and shake all the nations and bring their wealth. He would again FILL the house with glory and there would be peace there. This was to be much greater than Solomon had ever seen or David ever dreamed of!

Does this strike a chord with you? You can surely see what the message is here! Do you dare believe it? There are two stages:

1. God says that the work of restoring the Church is what he is doing. It looks an impossibly great task, especially if you have a keen awareness of the glory of the 'first house'- the Church in the New Testament. Look around now at the state of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ as you know

it, locally, nationally or internationally - what a mess! Very little seems to hang together, many vital joining pieces seem to be missing, the little bit of progress that we may have seen seems microscopic compared with the enormous gaping holes in what should be a beautiful unified building. We are designed to be joined to each other, stone to stone, on a global scale - we don't seem able to manage even the simplest of relationships... And God says, **"Be strong ...and work; for I AM WITH YOU."** Just the sort of encouragement we need when we find ourselves struggling with relationships in the Church. Please, take it personally!

2. Then, incredibly, the Lord says to us "Do not just be content to see the Church restored to the glory it had when it was first established; I want to do something even better... **The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house.** And in this place I will grant peace." This means that we can see the Church filled with the glory of God more than Peter, Paul or any of the early apostles did! Instead of looking at the book of Acts and thinking how wonderful it must have been to be alive then, we can begin to see the same and better springing up in reality in the daily life of the Church here in our own community! A joining of 'stone to stone' as the man-made barriers between us are reduced to nothing by the love and power flowing from the presence of God in his temple; that same love and power visible in our extra-ordinary 'ordinary' lives, bringing people to a real-life demonstration of the life of God! Real conversions as men and women are confronted with the claims of the living, ascended Lord Jesus and the demonstration of the authority of his name. Can it happen in reality? Will we believe what God is saying to us?

## 7. Practical Personal Obedience and Blessing

### Haggai 2:10-19

From the great vision of what he will achieve in the near and more distant future, the Lord turns back to the daily practicality of his people's walk with him. Here in the middle of a book dealing with what he will accomplish with his people as a body, he emphasises again the vital need for each one to stand before God. The questions of carrying consecrated meat in the fold of your garment or being ceremonially defiled by contact with a dead body seem a little remote from our present way of life, but they were practical questions at the time.

The clear point coming out of these two examples is this: being in contact with holiness does not make you holy; but being in contact with uncleanness does make you unclean. In other words, we cannot become acceptable to God by accident or by being in the right place at the right time: just as the meat had to be consecrated to become holy, so we need to be set apart for him. Unfortunately, we know only too well how easily the process works in reverse! Putting it another way; holiness is active - uncleanness is passive.

Everything the Jews were doing at the time was polluted because they were unclean before God. BUT, in spite of this, God still declares his blessing to them in **verses 15-19**. 'Officially', he could have rejected them out of hand; all their offerings to him were useless according to the law because, as a people, they were unclean. He chooses to deal graciously with them - why?

Look at **verses 15-17**. Looking back in time, the Lord says how it used to be before they started to rebuild the temple. As we have seen already, they were just about surviving. It was not just that their harvests failed or were much smaller than they expected. Even their stores diminished when their backs were turned! The Lord had struck them with blight, mildew and hail, but they had not turned to him.

BUT, he says, today is a turning point... "from this day on I will bless you." It was three months to the day since Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people had been stirred up by the Lord (**ch.1:13-15**). For three months they had worked, coming through discouragement with the word of the Lord, but still working on the temple. Nothing had been promised about their own personal circumstances; although they knew it was because of their wrong priorities that God had not blessed them, he had not yet promised to bless them with good harvests!

They had worked and maintained the vision simply on the basis of the glory which the Lord would receive through the temple. He had promised silver and gold for the temple, but not food for their families! Now it was the ninth month (about December), none of this year's meagre harvest was left in store. Now was seed time. They had neither food to eat nor seed to sow! The barns should have been filled up again with this year's harvest, but the harvest had failed. They had been working on the temple through the autumn. But still the Lord says "From this day on I will bless you".

The analogy is simple. You can see it for yourself. The people were motivated now by the glory of God, so much so that their own needs had become secondary. They were not 'running to their own house' any more, but giving the priority where God gave it, with little thought to their own needs. Where are we in this? The Lord knows our needs but he is looking for us to put his glory first; to stick on with his priorities even when there seems to be no blessing. The Jews had three months of obedience (and it was willing, inspired obedience) with discouragements, plus the word of the Lord, before they received any promise of personal blessing. The blessing itself followed instantly on the promise; "**from this day...**".

## 8. Future Authority of the People of God

### Haggai 2:20-23

Another glimpse of the future of the Church! God has already promised in **ch.2:6&7** that he will shake 'the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land' and that he will shake all nations and bring their wealth into the house of God. This passage is quoted in **Hebrews 12:26** and makes it very clear that it is to do with our receiving 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken'. 'Once more' means 'this will be the last time', so there is a finality about what God will do with the Church. We are to inherit the unshakeable kingdom of God and of his Christ (**Revelation 5:9-10, 11:15**).

But back to Haggai! God wants to underline to Zerubbabel that he will shake the heavens and the earth and overturn the power of thrones and kingdoms. Linked with the promises in **ch.2:6&7** and **Hebrews 12**, it emphasises to us the fact that God's plan is to sum everything up in Jesus and in his Church. As **Ephesians 3:10&11** says, his plan is to use the Church to reveal the wisdom of God 'to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' as well as on the earth.

**Verse 23** is a powerful picture of the future authority of the Church, as the Lord says that he will make Zerubbabel ('my servant') like a signet ring. A signet ring is not just a decoration for the hand, but a ring which carries the seal of the wearer. The impression of that ring is the equivalent of the wearer's signature, carrying all his authority and authorisation. God speaks direct to Zerubbabel as head of the people of Israel, and says he will invest all his (God's) authority in him 'on that day'.

There is no doubt that 'the saints' (that's us!) will reign with Jesus on earth. See **Daniel 7:18,22,27** and **Revelation 5:9&10**. In the meantime, we can begin to exercise a measure of that authority as we discover the authority of the name of Jesus. See **John 14:12, 16:23-27**, and many other references in the New Testament.

## **In Conclusion**

*The book of Haggai charts stages on the route to the restoration of the Church, not only to be what it once was, but also to become more glorious than it ever was before. I believe that this book speaks prophetically into our present day situation. May we be those who 'give careful thought' to our present situation, the historic realities of the Church and the purpose of God for his people and then move on in joyful, responsive obedience to the voice of the Spirit of God!*

David Taylor 1993

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