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Prophet Jim Smith. December 2004

Haggai. Prophet Jim Smith

Haggai left a very short book, but it contains powerful teaching. We know nothing about the prophet's origin or family. He just turns up in Jerusalem, as God's people are beginning to rebuild the Nation, after it's destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and as the 70 years of exile were coming to an end.

It's a bad situation into which he is called to speak. The great days of Israel are over. The Nation, physically and culturally had been destroyed. Skills and resources are scarce. Hope is small. The future is bleak. The people are not confident in God. How will this unknown prophet tackle the situation, and what message will he bring? Does it have any relevance today, or does his message belong to a distant past? Is this just a dry and dusty book, or a living reality for God's people today? Let's take a look.

1. In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

In my book on Jonah, I wrote this:- "From the very beginning it's clear who is in charge of a prophet's life. Prophets don't go around picking and choosing what they are going to do. They don't choose this and reject that. They are men and women under the direct authority of God. The message comes from God. It comes when God chooses to send it. There is no discussion. This doesn't make God a dictator with a big stick. He loves his prophets, just as he loves all his people. But when it comes to ministry, there just isn't any discussion." (See the book on "Jonah" in this series, page 1.)

I could write exactly the same thing about Haggai. The word of the Lord came to him, and so he had to minister that word. All prophecy has its origin in the heart of God. It comes "from" God to us. We receive, and deliver. Again as I said in my commentary on Jonah, a prophet receives his ministry from God, and his accreditation from the Church. Jonah Chapter 1 verse 1 supports this principle, and so does Haggai chapter 1 verse 1. It's exciting to see that God is consistent.

2/6 This is what the Lord Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.'" Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

The people had returned from exile in Babylon full of hope. But things had not worked out as they had hoped. Despite all their efforts, the economy wasn't improving, and they were finding the going tough. Inevitably, they began to ask questions about God. "Why" they probably asked "has this trouble come on us? Has God forgotten us?" They were echoing the words of the people of Israel after their escape from Egypt. (Exodus 14:11) As a consequence of all this trouble, they had neglected to build the house of the Lord. Into this situation, the prophet Haggai steps, and identifies the problem – "You have got your priorities wrong. It should be God first, and everything else second. That's why the economy is so bad. God is sending you a message – you have got your priorities wrong."

7/11 This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured," says the Lord. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labour of your hands."

The only way to put things right was to show God that they had received his warning through Haggai, and they wanted to change. They needed to reply to God – "Lord, you are right. We want to change our priorities. We want to put you first now." How could they do this? Haggai makes the way clear - they would have to sacrifice to make God's house beautiful.

It is important to understand the heart of this message. God wasn't asking for lots of glorious buildings, as a sign of commitment and obedience. He was asking for hearts which put him first in all things, and for this people, that meant building the Lord's house before making themselves comfortable. This message carries down the centuries, even to our day. God needs to know that in all things, we put him first. When we have this principle right, he can bless us. If we have this principle wrong, we can build ten million churches, and make them the finest in all creation. It will make no difference. All the prophets made this same point, and so did Jesus. If the heart is right, all is right. If the heart is wrong, all is wrong. (Mark 7:18-23)

12. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.

The people obeyed the voice of the Lord in the mouth of his prophet. They probably didn't know exactly what God wanted them to do, but they didn't really care. Whatever God wanted, they were willing to do. This is what God found in David:- Ac 13:22 "After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'"

Why do we find it so hard to obey in this way? Sometimes we are closed to the will of God, sometimes we are afraid of the will of God, and sometimes we just don't understand the will of God. But none of these things matter. The consequences of obedience should not concern us. All we know is that God, who loves us, wants us to do as he says. Why should we want anything else?

13. And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord.

The people responded to the Lord through the prophet Haggai. That must have been a real encouragement to him. So often, both then and now, people do not respond to the Lord through the message of a prophet. I can give powerful testimony to this truth. When I began as a prophet, I thought that people would be glad to hear what God had to say to them. But I soon discovered that I had made a mistake. I found that people fell into the following categories:-

1. Those who did not want to hear from God. They liked things the way they were, and had no intention of changing. The hearers of Jeremiah fell into this group
2. People who said they did want to hear from God, but only wanted to hear what they wanted to hear. Ahab and Jehoshaphat are in this group
3. People who want to hear, but have no intention of doing anything with what they hear.
4. Those – few in number – who do want to hear from God, and do want to respond.

But Haggai was blessed, and in response he blessed the people with this message "I am with you" says the Lord. Prophets are not by nature hard. They, like the One they serve, want to bring encouragement and healing. It's just that they do not often get the opportunity. When Haggai saw the change of heart, he immediately responded with a message of blessing and encouragement. "I am with you" appears often in the Bible, as a blessing and encouragement. Read these passages:- Matthew 28:20; Genesis 26:24; Joshua 3:7; Jeremiah 1:8; Acts 18:10

14/15 So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began work on the house of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

So the rebuilding began, and the whole programme was led by the leaders. Leaders must lead, and this was a lesson we learnt in Jonah's story. To summarise what I said there:-

1. Leaders must lead.

Individual response to God is good, but it is not enough. Leaders have to lead the way. This is a proven biblical principle. Take a look at these believers:-

Shadrach – took on the responsibility for standing for the truth. (Daniel 3:16-18)

Moses – took the burden of responsibility on himself, when the people rebelled and offended God. (Numbers 14:20)

Elijah - took the burden of responsibility on himself when the people followed after false gods (1 Kings 18:30)

Esther – took the responsibility on herself when the people were in danger. (Esther 4:16)

The Apostles – took the responsibility of establishing Deacons (Acts 6:2-5)

Leadership means just that - the willingness to take the challenge and risk of leading, and to respond to God so that his people can see what they also must do. So often, those appointed as leaders seem unwilling to take on this responsibility. No wonder so many of God's people are unsure and insecure. The pagan king of Nineveh had no such problems. He saw where his responsibility lay, responded himself, and challenged his people to do the same.

Chapter 2

1 On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai:

2 “Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them,

3 ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’

4 But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,’ declares the Lord. ‘Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the Lord, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the Lord Almighty.

5 ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’

6 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.

7 I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty.

8 ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty.

9 ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.

Don't be put off by the length of this passage, or its apparent complexity. This is a beautiful piece of prophecy, as we shall see. Things had not gone well in the rebuilding. The people went to the ruined Temple, but when they saw the size of the task, they were very disappointed. We have to remember that they had very little recourse, and they probably had only a few craftsmen and builders among them. Solomon had thousands of builders, craftsmen and slaves, and loads of money! The people wanted to obey the Lord, but how could they? They had found the obedience,

but didn't have the skill. It's against this backgrounds that Haggai prophesies to them. Let's go through his message a step at a time:-

1. "Speak". (v1)

Were the people excited to see Haggai approaching them with something to say? people are not always glad to see a prophet. Ahab wasn't overexcited to see Elijah (1 Kings 18:16) and Jehoshaphat didn't want to hear from Micaiah ben Imlah. (1 Kings 22:8) God's people do not always want to hear from God. Why not?

They don't want to be disturbed.
They don't want to have their error pointed out.
They don't want to change.

Fortunately, this people had excellent leaders, who wanted to hear and who wanted to put things right between themselves and God.

2: 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?' (v3)

They looked back to the former glory days, and they realised that they could never build such a Temple again. This negative thought brought them to a standstill. There are two lessons here:-

1. We are where we are, and God knows it.

The Lord knew the former glory, but he wasn't expecting this small band of people to produce such a Temple again. They were where they were, and he knew it. Our God is totally realistic. He knows the reality of our lives. We must work now, where we are, with what we have got. If we do that, then the later glory will not be like the former glory - it will be greater, because it will be today's glory, not yesterday's glory. Who wants to eat yesterdays bread? I want fresh bread today! I want today's glory.

2. Don't look at the problems, only the opportunities.

This was Peter's great mistake as he walked on the water. He took his eye off of the possibilities, and looked at the problems, and down he went! Many years ago, I became aware that in my work, I was very definitely walking on water. There was very little money, yet the work was growing and growing. I cried out the Lord - "there's nothing beneath my feet!" He replied "Then don't look down!" Let's be as realistic as our God. Everything is impossible if that is what we want. Let's look up, let's look ahead, let's build for today and leave the rest to him.

3. But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,' declares the . 'Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the , 'and work. (v4)

Be strong says the Lord, and get on with your work. He said the same to Joshua (Joshua 1:6) and he says the same to all of his people in every generation. "Be strong

in the Lord, and in his mighty power.” (Ephesians 6:10) We are not defeated, we are overcomers (Romans 8:37) we are winners. So let’s draw on his strength and work! I like the last two words “and work.” In the end, no amount of gazing up into heaven will get the job done. There comes a day for getting up and getting on. But if we do, what will happen?

4. For I am with you,’ declares the Almighty. (v4)

We have already met this promise, and here it is again – “I am with you.” What else could we need?

5. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear. “This is what the Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Almighty.” (v 5-9)

It seems to me that God knows us very well. “I am with you” ought to be enough for us, but often it is not. We want and need more. Knowing this, God adds much more to “I am with you”:-

a) “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt.

God reminds his people of the true meaning of “covenant.” A covenant is a deep commitment, a promise to stand by those we covenant with. The people are reminded that hundreds of years previously, God made commitment to his people. As far as he is concerned, despite all the intervening centuries, nothing has changed. As he promised to be with Moses, so he is with Zerubbabel, Joshua and the other leaders. We humans have short lives, and sometimes take a very short term view of things. God takes the long term view, and we should try to follow his example.

b) And my Spirit remains among you.

But it not necessary to return to the time of the exodus to experience God. His spirit (Greek “pneuma” πνευμα) is with us now! Jesus had to teach his disciples the same lesson:- “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever—the Spirit (pneuma πνευμα) of truth. (John 14:16-17)

c) Do not fear. “This is what the Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land.”

God gets to the heart of the matter. It isn’t just the size of the task which is daunting them. They are also being invaded by the spirit of fear. They are not the first – see Gideon (Judges 6:15-16) and the disciples. (Mark 4:38) They won’t be the last. But those who wait on the Lord need not be afraid. (Isaiah 40:31)

d) I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the Almighty.'

This prophecy just gets better and better. "I am with you"; "my covenant is with you"; "my spirit is with you"; and now, God reminds his people that it is his job to bless or not to bless. If the house is to be filled with glory he will do it. He has done it before (2 Chronicles 5: 13-14) and if he so wishes, he will do it again. If the house needs to be made physically beautiful, he will provide all the silver and all the gold. And if that is not enough, then comes the most fantastic promise of all. To grasp it, let's use our imagination.

Jerusalem was a broken down city. The Babylonians had destroyed it by fire, and taken away all but the poorest people. It had been in ruins for 70 years. Now a few exiles have returned, but the economy is struggling – in fact all of life is a struggle. Today, they stand in the ruins of the old and massive Temple. They want to rebuild, but the task is hopeless. Solomon, who built the first Temple, had all the wealth and skill at his disposal to complete such a task. They, in contrast, have so little. Even if they build to the best of their ability, it is only going to be a small and simple building, unworthy of its predecessor.

Into this situation the Lord speaks a stunning message – "the house you are going to build will be more glorious than the one which went before!" What a fabulous promise! But how can it be? The leaders would have benefited from the word so the angel Gabriel to Mary "with God nothing is impossible." (Luke 1:37) Once we put our trust in such a God, we can have peace.

So this enormous prophecy comes to an end. It is truly fantastic- so deep and wide in its perception and in its hope. Let's remember, the same God works with us today, by his spirit. What Haggai and the people did, we can do - great works for the glory of God, even greater works than Jesus. (John 14:12) Let it be said of us "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house."

2:10-19 On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says: If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?'" The priests answered, "No." Then Haggai said, "If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?" "Yes," the priests replied, "it becomes defiled." Then Haggai said, "'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the Lord. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled. "Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty.

I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the Lord. 'From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig-tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. "From this day on I will bless you."

Like all prophets, Haggai will not settle for outward change. He looks for an inward change of heart. This inward change is what really matters to him. Jeremiah said it:-

"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (31:33)

Ezekiel said it:- "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh." (11:19)

Jesus said it:- "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matt 5:8)

What is Haggai saying in this prophecy? It is very simple:- "If you carry something holy in your pocket, does that make the ground you walk on holy? No. Does it make you holy? No. But if you touch a dead person, does that defile all of you? Yes. So – don't pretend to be holy. Don't say "We have the Temple, so we are holy." Buildings don't make you holy. What is in your heart makes you holy, or defiles you. (Jesus said the same - Mark 7:18-20) It was this attitude which brought the Nation down in the first place. So - give very careful thought to your way of life, to your behaviour, to your thoughts, to your life and witness. If you don't believe this message, then ask yourself "Why hasn't the land been fruitful? It is because God is trying to tell you – give careful thought to your ways. Now, from this day on, let there be holiness in your heart, not the things which lead to death."

It seems a very clear word to me to every generation of God's people. We quickly move from a living and active faith, to ritual, habit and religion. It's only a short step to saying "I go to the Church every week. I give my tithes, I read the Bible. It doesn't matter what else I do." But Haggai would say that it does matter.

If we hear this word then we can accept the promise "from this day, I will bless you." Like all good prophecy, there is a challenge and a blessing. And what a blessing! Again Haggai holds out the most blessed of promises – God will be with us.

2:20-23 The word of the Lord came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. "On that day,' declares the Lord Almighty, 'I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord Almighty."

As we come to the end of this fantastic little book, we have been given the opportunity to learn so much about God, and about our own attitudes, expectations and behaviour. I have always loved the prophet Haggai. He has taught me so much, and I keep on learning from his honest and straight forward approach to his work. So what will his final word be? How will he direct us as he leaves the stage of history? It is, again, very simple – leaders matter, and leaders need encouragement.

Zerubbabel had the worst job in town. He had to lead a small and demoralised people, in difficult circumstances. Times were hard, and confidence was low. To this appointed leader, God says:-

1. “Tell Zerubbabel..”

God’s message to Zerubbabel was simple – “you matter to me so much that I am sending you a personal word of encouragement.” If the leader needed uplifting, this is surely the best way to do it.

2. “I will shake..”

As Zerubbabel surveyed the position of his small nation, things looked far from good. Babylon had let them go, but for how long? The nation which had destroyed once could do so again. And even if the Babylonians were about to be overthrown, whoever took their place would be just as dangerous. Then there were the surrounding nations. They hated Israel, had rejoiced at the destruction of the nation, and were ever ready to strike a blow against them. Things were not much better from the south. Egypt had been dominated by Babylon, but she was a sleeping giant, and no friend of Israel. Zerubbabel could be forgiven for being concerned. But the Lord says to him “ I am the Lord. I shake the nations. I lift up and pull down nations. I the Lord am your Lord. So do not be afraid.”

Through his prophet, God changed the perspective of Zerubbabel. We can almost see him lifting up his troubled head, and saying “Yes. That’s right. The Lord he is God, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.(Psalm 79:13) Why should we be afraid?”

3. I have chosen you.

Zerubbabel is leader not by the will of men, but by the will of God. He was chosen, just as Saul was chosen and David was chosen. He was not lucky in getting the job. He was not ruler because he had an influential father. He was not leading because no one else would do it. He was chosen. He was God’s choice. And with God on his side, he need not be anxious or afraid. God takes a very serious view of leaders and leadership. He backs those who he calls to positions of leadership, and we should learn to do the same, and stop complaining and undermining God’s chosen ones.

But Haggai prophesied this last word not just to Zerubbabel. Over the centuries, many have been in desperate circumstances. Many have been at the end of their endurance. Many have thought that they would be overwhelmed by the enemies of God. It wasn't just Zerubbabel who received this message, It is word to all of us, ant all times and in all places - “I, your Lord, have chosen you.” Alleluia.