

Thursday Bible Class

24th Apr. 2014

Haggai

Reading: Haggai 1

Dear Brethren and Sisters

Haggai the prophet. What do we know about this prophet who delivered the shortest but one prophecy in the Bible? His name means Festive, or festive one. There was a not huge amount to be cheerful about at first glance one might think, we read of crops failing, of there being little rain, of the work of building having stopped. -Seems rather gloomy. But after reading and digesting the message of Haggai, it quickly becomes apparent that the meaning his name is indeed appropriate., as we shall see. Possibly Haggai was an old man, explaining perhaps the brevity of the book, as in chapter 2 verse 3 Haggai draws attention to the temple of Solomon, and compares it to the one being constructed now. Presumably despite being inspired his words would have little effect if he didn't know what he was talking about, so it is likely that he himself was old enough like a few of the older members of the returned exiles to also remember the former house.

Besides this we know little of Haggai. It is not surprising as God obscures the personal aspects of the messenger, as it is the message that is all important. As we can quickly establish the prophet lived at the same time as the return of the exiles from Babylon. The prophecy is divided into four main messages. The first vision came to Haggai in the second year of Darius the king. This was Darius Hystaspes who reigned from BC522 -486. The reason for this is given in the message delivered by the prophet to the leader of the people – Zerubbabel, and Joshua the high priest. *This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.* Just why was that we might ask? One of the reasons we accept

prophets and books as part of the Holy Canon, is that they are verified and cross referenced elsewhere in the Scriptures, and indeed the historical narrative provided by Ezra the scribe gives just this verification, and further background information. In his fourth chapter he records how the enemies of Judah, the synonym for the returned exiles, which also did contain other tribes as well by the way, *Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.* These enemies decided through jealousy and their own insecurities to make life hard, and were determined to stop the reconstruction of the city and temple, sending legal letters challenging the validity of the Jews return and at the same time undermining and damaging the character and intentions of the newly re-established autonomous province, it is a rebellious and bad city, and they won't pay tax or tribute but revolt again.

The enemies succeeded at first in their spiteful endeavour, the newly crowned emperor was not aware of the earlier decrees, and gave credence to these petitions from the Jews enemies. Ezra 4: 24 *Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.* It must have seemed like a mortal blow to the newly returned exiles, that it is easy for us to underestimate. It undermined their very existence, all the effort thus far, that long journey, all that upheaval, from the comfort and technological advantages of Babylon, to this backwater, even though it was home. Just what was the point if now we are not allowed to do anything? We might as well, just give up being a nation, and look after our families and concentrate on ourselves. A perfectly natural reaction. This retrenchment, this

falling away as a reaction to the discouraging news, was a typical symptom of fading faith. You will notice this reaction in the previous history of Israel. Every man to his tents, O Israel. Seems to be a recurring cry at times of crisis. Time of Gideon, when the people went after Absalom, when Sheba the son of Bichri blew a trumpet, when Rehoboam took the counsel of the young men, and even in the time of the Lord Jesus, when Nicodemus stuck up for Jesus, the response, *Art thou also from Galilee, and every man went unto his own house.* John 7:53.

The natural reaction when adverse conditions, is to go into a blue funk, raise the drawbridge and retreat behind the barrier. Not stand and fight. It was the reaction here at the time of this setback. It was only a setback as history shows, but at the time it seemed like the end of the world. When we are in the middle of a crisis, we can overreact, and get things out of proportion. That is when the most damage is actually done. Not the crisis itself, but our reaction. So here. The situation exposed their underlying weakness, Many had returned to seek a better way of life it seems, not necessarily the right motive, for change, the motive should have been to seek a more godly way of life. Not material gain, but spiritual gain.

Their plans in tatters for a grand temple and city, they turned to their own houses, *everyman to his tent O Israel.* This was of course a convenient excuse. *Ah an obstacle. The sign of resistance, Means we can't continue. Let's stay in the comfort of our own home, and focus on me, my family,* Introspection sets in. It is what happens when we forget God is in control. He overrules all things for good to them that love him. He would not cast off his people whom he had foreknew. Thus he sent a message to Haggai again for him to relay to the leaders of people. Ezra 5:1. *Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in*

Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel even unto them. And we note the words Haggai was told to use in verse 2 *Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.* Note the way God used the words the Lord of Hosts. Thirteen times in this short book this title of the Deity is used. Yahweh of armies. It was a similar moment to when Elisha prayed and said Lord open the young man's eyes, and he saw the valley full of the chariots and horsemen of Israel, the angels of the Lord, If the Lord be for us who can be against us. *The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.* Also, they themselves were the army of the Lord.

True they were under performing spiritual soldiers, but their captain was Yahweh. Had he ever failed them before? Why did they not trust him? On an individual level people had forgotten this. To cover their weak faith, and readiness to down tools, they came up with a grand reason. "The time is not come!" Perhaps some of them believed that the prophecy of Jeremiah's seventy years granted them reason not to continue with the building, or that they had more time, and so on. But it was weak reasoning. David was told he couldn't build the house, but that didn't stop him vigorously preparing for it, and supporting the effort that would come. Proverbs 22:13 The slothful man saith, *There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets.* This was the truth of it. They were looking for the excuse. Thus Haggai's Divinely inspired and direct response was with irony *Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses, and this house lie waste?* The rhetorical question demanded an answer No it is not the time to sit at home and twiddle with fancy wooden panelling and rosette mouldings and tephillim while the very central focus of their existence, the house of the Lord languishes, with weeds growing

through the foundations, an unsightly embarrassment to the whole city. Consider you ways! Another repeatedly emphasised sublime message! It is the message of the Apostle Paul no less: 2 Corinthians 13:5 *Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?* No good making excuses, and blaming our inactivity on our circumstances, or situation. There is always something we can do for God. Funny how we manage to find time to eat, and chat and fiddle with the computer, well and good, but building the Lord's house can take a back seat, which needs considering, Haggai says rightfully. He then refers them to the difficult circumstances in which they are in. But note not once does he refer to the immediate and obvious crisis. That of Tatnai, Shetharboznai, and the Apharsachite crew. To the people, these were the enemy, the cause of all the trouble, but Haggai doesn't refer to them once.

Those outside are not really the enemies of those who build the house. The real enemies are ourselves, are within. Thus Haggai, refers them to the withdrawal of blessings from God. God promised the nation in Deut. 28 *Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store, blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field.* As Haggai works his way through the evidence of God's displeasure which had befallen them because of their unbelief, he outlined how instead of blessings they had invoked the opposite, cursings. You have sown much and bring in little - Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store. Hag 1:10 *Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit.* As God promised in the law Deuteronomy 28:23-24 *And thy heaven that is*

over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron. The Lord shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed. Verse 11 of Haggai 1: *And I called for a drought upon the land, and upon the mountains, and upon the corn, and upon the new wine, and upon the oil,* Deuteronomy 28:22 *The Lord shall smite thee with blasting, and with mildew.* And why was all this? The law of God stated, that the curses would befall them *if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee:* This was in fact the situation.

Their heart was not right. However it was not beyond repentance. Haggai was inspired to address the root cause: *Ye looked for much, and, lo it came to little. They expected the blessings of God, and couldn't understand when everything went wrong.* This does not mean that when adverse conditions beset us that it is directly because we have sinned, or our heart is not right. This as the mistake that Job's friends made It is not always the case. But one cannot expect much, when we are hoping to receive the blessings of God on the one hand, and yet on the other seeking only to please ourselves. We cannot serve God and mammon. *Ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes.* Yes their daily struggle of survival was just that, they were living just like the other nations, the people that they had left behind, concerned with clothing, food eating, and drinking and dare we say giving in marriage – as Ezra indicates in his record, in this pursuit of material benefit, which although is necessary is not the be all and end all of life. The returned exiles had descended into the daily grind, because they were not allowing God in their life. He should have been the centre, then everything else falls in place. Take

no thought for the morrow, said the Lord Jesus, the morrow will take care of itself. Instead, the focus should be different Luke 12:33 *Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth.* Once the house of God is well founded, built up and developed, then God will protect care and make up our lack. *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.* Matthew 6.

Haggai gave the Divine command verse 8. *Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.* Now forget your own houses, stop hiding away, and ignoring the plight of the city, stop being frightened of the shadows, and seeing obstacles in everything, and go up the mountain and get wood. This command meant venturing forth from behind the city walls. It meant actively seeking the best ilex and acacia trees themselves. Before Cyrus and sent deliveries to help them establish themselves in the land. It had made them dependant. Now Haggai was encouraging them to be active to get out there and work.

The mature trees were not available in the valleys and plains as the Babylonians had cut many of them down for the siege, and to create ramparts etc. It meant rolling up the sleeves and getting stuck in. Not something perhaps the people were used to, initially the surge of enthusiasm under Nehemiah where goldsmiths were happy to undertake a bit of masonry and brickwork, but now it seems they were out of practise. Haggai's call for action was to shake them out of this complacency. It is what is required of all the servants of the Lord, the disciples of Christ. Not to be settled in our comfort zone as it were. - To put God first. We will find ourselves doing things that

we do not always really want to do. At least we don't have to resist unto blood. We are not asked to submit to crucifixion, but instead to deny ourselves, even as Christ gave Himself for us. He always put the will of God first, and sought not to please Himself. If they undertook to do this, Haggai promised the Lord would take much pleasure in it, and would be glorified. . We read, how *Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai* . They obeyed. This was an excellent response. It is some indication of the hard labour and uncomfortable truths that Haggai and his companion Zechariah had to deliver, and that was not a pleasant work either. Yet they did it. They were a great example. Together they stirred up the people. The leaders such as Zerubabel, and Joshua were themselves men of faith, but just needed that little extra enthusiasm. We can all do with that. On our own, we can wilt, Eccles 4: 9. *Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow:* It is not often in Scripture that we find the lone voice witnessing against faithlessness. There is always encouragement or a companion to assist. So with Haggai and Zechariah; Ezra and Nehemiah; Zerubbabel and Joshua and so on. V13 Then spake Haggai the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the Lord.

It was this wonderful message that actually stirred up the spirit of the governor, and the high priest. Just as God has given strength to all those who trust in him: Romans 8:31 *What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?* Paul was much straitened, but he prayed, and he reports *Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was*

delivered out of the mouth of the lion. Thus it was that the word of Haggai was heeded. This was greatly encouraging. Other prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel did not seem to have as much immediate success, though to be fair the circumstances were different, but nevertheless, it shows that a living dog is better than a dead lion. There is always hope, and the work of witnessing must always continue. They came and did work in the House of the Lord. Now to illustrate how God works, he wanted the people to make the effort and do their part, he wanted them to put him first, to correctly prioritise their life. He would do the rest. He would make up their lack. How was this done. Just as he works today behind the scenes. Ezra shows how the infuriated enemies Tatnai and Shetharboznai etc continued in their letter writing, the tactic worked before why not try it again, and they asked that the king check that the decree had ever been written in the first place that the Jews should return to the land. They were banking on the either their belief it was all made up, or that the scrolls/ tablets had been lost. Their tactic much like the modern tactic of the Palestinians and their supporters to delegitimise Israel spectacularly back fired, as God ensured and overruled that the right records be located, and that Darius instead of agreeing with the complainants signed with the plaintiffs, and instructed the Samaritans to actually ensure the Jews were well supplied and to assist them in the work of providing materials.

In the event then, the people were assisted by their very enemies! It is the ways of Providence which shows how God works in mysterious ways, but always to show compassion and mercy to those who trust in him. As God knows the thoughts and intents of the heart, he did not leave the nation to carry on, as sure as anything the heads would fall, and energies flag, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. So again and again Haggai was furnished with Divine instruction and

encouragement. Just a few days later further words: for Hag 2:3 *Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?* Haggai knew that to be the case, as recorded by Ezra: Ezra 3:12 *But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:* Not all shouted for joy. Some were unhappy that it was not the same as the former glory, and had a sulk. As the prophet Zechariah speaks, in a similar context Zechariah 4: 10 *For who hath despised the day of small things?* We can turn up our nose at some of things we are asked to do for the Ecclesia the House of God, but it is but a training ground, for the great time to come. Be strong be strong be strong was Gods emphatic message to all, The Hebrew means more to seize, to get hold of, thus it is to be zealous, and full of drive, resolve and enthusiasm. Don't be defeated. God reminded them of His Holy Covenant when they came out of Egypt-already alluded to in the blessings and cursing earlier. Called to be a peculiar people, a Kingdom of priests and a Holy nation, Moreover God promised that He would meet with the children of Israel, and would sanctify them, and would dwell among them, and be there God. Ex 29: 45. *And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God.* 46. *And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God.* Though it being a day of small things, the day would come, when the glory of this latter house would be greater than that of the former.

How so if it is so small. God was not speaking of that specific house, but This Latter House, that is the House of Prayer for all Nations, where all nations would flow unto it, and it would be established on

top of the mountains, and when the law of God would go for the from Zion. Nevertheless, even as they had experienced a great shaking of the political heavens in their own lifetime, so those earthquakes would continue on, so that Gods' will overcomes that of man, as they themselves had learned the hard way. There would be a great shaking, as the Apostle endorses in the letter to the Hebrews, where the political firmament of the Gentiles would be rolled away as a vesture and all will be changed.

Then the desire of all nations will come proclaimed Haggai. Just what is this desire of all nations. To the Jews labouring under the noonday sun, trowel in hand, they would know that the desire of all nations is the subjugation of neighbours and the elevation of each tribe over others,,. They had experienced the brutal reasoning of national superiority and expansionism of their enemies. No Haggai was not referring to that. Bro. Thomas in Eureka makes the point, in the translation as it should be.. *that to be desired of all nations, they shall come, and I will fill this house with glory.* The they, therefore are the desire of all nations. It is those who bring in peace, righteousness and equity. It is those who will be the Royal Priesthood of the Glory to come. The Lord Jesus and all the saints with him, who will enter into the House of Prayer for all nation, in reflection and manifestation of the glory of God, which will fill the House. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, the work which endures the fire of adversity, Malachi whose ministry possibly overlapped that of Haggai couched it in this way Mal 3: 17. *And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.* Again God visited Haggai and gave him a

further message to deliver. A message designed to assist the people, now labouring with zeal, to assist them spiritually. To appreciate the work which they were doing was not a simple transactional thing they had embarked upon, so that they could be blessed, but that it was a work of the highest privilege, and esteem. As such their minds should be purified, and free of grudge.

Haggai showed them how under the law, that despite the priests sanctity, did they by touching render an unclean thing clean again? The answer was of course not. People understood that. Only if they offered the sacrifice and partook of it under the law, or made personal sacrifice could they be cleansed. Not only by association, , or touching but by partaking, and by being covered, washed thoroughly by the blood of the Lamb are we cleansed. It requires a great deal of effort, and involves the mind. However under the law, Haggai taught them how relatively easy it was to be defiled, with the greatest of ease, and that not even involving the mind, then came the stern reprimand. *So is this people, and so is this nation before me, saith the Lord; and so is every work of their hands; and that which they offer there is unclean.* It was not intended as discouragement, but a call to apply their labour with understanding, that they were naturally polluted, and it would only be by their faith, prayers, and conviction in the saving grace of God, that they should endeavour to build up a spiritual house, not being indifferent and careless, but to build both physically and mentally binding together, in one hope, and one Body, and thus be able to be a sanctified house as a nation. Further Haggai takes them back to the earlier point. Why were they surprised that since they had ceased building, when stone was laid upon a stone, why since then were they surprised not to see the realisation of the crop yield that they expected. They thought that they would be bountifully blessed automatically. That

is arrogance. Why should the elect expect to be treated any different to anyone else. It must not be an expectation. It is not a right. We deserve no more. It is a gift by grace. And why expect an increase when obsessed with their own folly,. Giving not the honour to God, or blessing him and praising and thanking him for the good things they do receive. It is too easy to forget that. But the reprimand is completed with startling message of love. - Despite their feebleness, despite their ingratitude, and presumptuousness. From this day I will bless you. Why so? - Because they were being obedient. The proof of the earlier passage quoted “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”

The last message from Haggai, was addressed to Zerubbabel, though named of the seed of Babylon, he proved to be of the seed of the woman, of the royal lineage of David, it was he who laid the first foundation stone, and upon the return from exile built the alter to the Lord, to him Haggai repeated I will shake the heavens and the earth. To this man, Haggai appealed, not for Zerubbabel’s benefit, and he was demonstrably a man of deep faith , but those looking on, as Zechariah described him and his fellows to be wondered at they were men of sign. It was what they symbolised, that added the dimension, that God required. He as the rightful heir to the throne typified the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who will build up again the waste places and restore again that which the nations have broken down. To him, God through Haggai announced. I will overthrow the throne of Kingdoms. Echoing surely the prophecy given a few years previously to Daniel a man beloved, *And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall*

stand for ever, But perhaps more specifically the seat of the Beast, and I will destroy the strength of the Kingdoms of the nations, that which was derived from the whore of Babylon, the influence of which had infiltrated even the feeble folk building anew. The strength of man will be overthrown, but Haggai concluded with triumph In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the Lord of hosts. Even as this man was rewarded for his indefatigable zeal, and leadership, so too as a man of sign, the governor, he who will have the government upon his shoulder, Wonderful, Counsellor, the foundation that is laid, the master builder, the line and plummet, the Head of the Corner... He will be made as the signet ring of God. The seal of His authority, the identity of God, God manifest in the flesh. In a day, when the signet ring impressions upon a clay seal from Darius meant the difference between life or death, victory and defeat, such a description was apt for the One to come, who will be taken from amongst his brethren, far greater authority than all kingdoms of the earth put together who will give the Divine stamp of approval to the building again of the Temple of the Lord in all its glory, to be sanctified on the feats of tabernacles. .

Truly Haggai was well named as Festive