

Haggai 1:5

Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought” to your ways.

The little books of Zephaniah, Haggai and Malachi, are the last three books of the OT

- Much of the Old Testament is not in chronological order, the OT being arranged according to type of book
- Law, Former Prophets, Writings and Latter Prophets – rather than in date order

The Old Testament is a double-decker sandwich, with three slices of bread and two lots of filling

- The first slice of bread is the creation and the patriarchs:
- Creation, fall, flood, tower, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the slavery in Egypt that followed
- The first lot of filling is the Exodus:
- Deliverance, Law, the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea and the 40 years wandering that followed
- The second slice of bread is entering Canaan and the establishment of the kingdom
- Crossing River Jordan, Capturing Jericho, Conquering Canaan, Complete dominion
- Followed by the era of the Judges, when the people often rebelled; a cycle of disobedience and renewal
- The first King of Israel, Saul, was followed by David and Solomon before the kingdom was divided
- The unrighteous Northern Kingdom of Israel was eventually conquered by Assyria
- The inconsistent Southern Kingdom of Judah was eventually conquered by Babylon
- The second lot of filling is the Exile: people from Judah were displaced over the Babylonian Empire
- Until the Persian Empire expanded and Babylon was conquered, and the exiles were allowed to return
- The third slice of bread is what happens after the exile – this is the time of Haggai

The book of Ezra records how Cyrus the Persian issued a decree to rebuild the Jerusalem temple

- And returned the gold and silver articles that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple
- when the 'Judah-ites', or Jews, returned to Jerusalem, foundations for the temple were laid (Ezra 5:16)
- The leaders having built an altar and sacrificed burnt offerings (Ezra 3:2), but after 18 further years
- the work was not completed or even well on the way; so God raised up the prophet Haggai (Haggai)

The great theme of the prophet Haggai is the need to rebuild the temple of the Lord

- That might sound like a good thing to do, and very convenient texts to use when we need a new church
- Or a church building needs renovation or redecorating; but such a great leap is unjustified
- saying 'Haggai said "rebuild the temple", so we Christians must improve our building or have a new one'

During their wanderings in the wilderness the Hebrew people had the tabernacle

- it was a place of prayer and meditation,
- but it was also a place of sacrifice, with a sacrificing priest to make offerings to deal with sin
- the last of the judges, who were more heroic and charismatic leaders than elderly men with wigs and robes
- were followed by the era of the kingdom – with three kings of the united Israel
- Saul, David and Solomon – like all kings they were interested in royal palaces
- But King David wanted to build a temple as a dwelling for God

After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

(2 Samuel 7:1-2)

The ark mentioned here is the Ark of the Covenant, best described as a ceremonial box, trimmed with gold

- That represented the promises and presence of God to his people housed in the tabernacle (a special tent)
- it was David's great desire to build a dwelling place for God but Solomon who built a fantastic temple
- and this remained, until its destruction by the Babylonian forces of Nebuchadnezzar

Ezra (1:1-3) leaves no doubt about the proper course of action

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you - may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem ... Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites - everyone whose heart God had moved - prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem ... Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god ... This was the inventory: gold dishes 30 silver dishes 1,000 silver pans 29 gold bowls 30 matching silver bowls 410 other articles 1,000. In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

A more-detailed decree of Cyrus is found in Ezra 6:3-5:

“Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be ninety feet high and ninety feet wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God.”

To be fair, this is what the Judah-ites in exile had been longing for

- Cyrus and Darius the Great allowed Zerubbabel, who was an heir to David's throne
- To be the governor of the province of Judea, yet work on the rebuilding of the temple had ground to a halt
- When everything had started so well, what went wrong? The answer is all too familiar
- The returned exiles faced opposition from Samaritans and others who lived in the land
- During the 70 years in Babylon, most of the exiles had come to consider the strange land their home
- No doubt some of the Hebrews had been doing well financially and made that a priority not God

It is against this background that the prophet Haggai appears, but we know little about him personally

- Nothing is known about his ancestry or his age, where he came from or if he had been in Babylon
- there are only two other references to him (Ezra 5:1; 6:14) outside his own book
- He preached in Jerusalem for about four months
- Nevertheless, Haggai is a man of conviction and holds a unique place among the prophets
- For the people really listened to him and obeyed the word he brought
- Although they had been dithering for 18 years
- in just four years the temple was completed

Why was Haggai so concerned about the state of the temple?

- His opening charge is that the people of God had put their own concerns before God's
- They had built their own houses, but let the programme of reconstruction on the house of God lapse
- The temple and Mount Zion on which it sat represented God's dwelling place on earth
- Therefore, the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar was blasphemy
- The only way to rectify this situation was to rebuild the temple
- Haggai believed that the temple must be restored before the people can know the blessings of the Lord
- If the temple was rebuilt the glory of the Lord might return and dwell with his people

Haggai's book opens with a dispute between God and the people of Jerusalem with Haggai speaking for God

- He begins by calling the people in Jerusalem, 'this people' (1:2), not 'my people' but 'this people'
- 'This people' were saying it was not time to rebuild the temple – they were busy with their houses
- Haggai asked if it was time to build their own elaborate, luxurious houses
- And not time to rebuild the house of God
- No doubt, there are always more convenient times for the work of God
- As is often the case, it might simply have been the leaders who prospered
- For the rest of the people seem to have been suffering
- From crop failures, 'you have planted much but have harvested little' (1:6)
- From food shortages, 'you eat, but never have enough' (1:6)
- From drought, 'You drink but never have your fill' (1:6)
- From poverty, 'You put on clothes, but are not warm' (1:6)
- And inflation, 'you earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it' (1:6)

It is possible that the people used these hardships as an excuse for not rebuilding the temple

- But Haggai said their sufferings were God's judgment because they had not rebuilt it
- The people had neglected the things of God and the promises of God
- Poor harvests (Deut. 28:38), insufficient food (8:10), inadequate clothes (10:18)
- Were all the result of a failure to keep God's covenant
- Therefore Haggai tells his listeners to go up to the mountain and bring wood
- And build the house – then God will be pleased and will be honoured

So the punch-line of Haggai is nothing more than this: "Build God's house"

- But it would be a careless application of God's word simply to conclude
- that all that God is saying to us through Haggai today is keep your church buildings in good order
- It is obvious that worshipping God in a poor building, run on a shoestring
- And funded by raffles and jumble sales while worshippers live a grand lifestyle
- Is scarcely honouring to God, but in Jesus, one greater than the temple has come
- So that for us, it is not a matter of building schemes, but spiritual priorities
- Not a matter of an earthly kingdom and a resplendent temple built of stone
- But of an earthly kingdom and a temple built of living stones, men and women (1 Peter 2:4)
- But in this context Haggai has even more to say to us than about a building scheme
- The prophet Haggai spoke when it was important that the Judahites (or Jews) took stock
- The Jews were in a state of moral paralysis, which accepted as 'normal' things that should change
- If that does not sound familiar in the church today, I don't know what does
- Haggai did not give a list of gross sins, but the people lacked a will to challenge and to change
- People who would say, 'it does not need to be like this' and who would change their priorities

I CONSIDER YOUR WAYS (Give careful thought to your ways v. 5, 7)

Twice in the space of three verses the word comes, ‘Consider your ways’

- It is a constant theme in Haggai (1:5, 1:7, 2:15, 2:18)
- The people started well enough, they had returned from Babylon and rebuilt the altar
- But now they were dispirited, weary and suffering persecution
- They were in the midst of crop failure, food shortages, drought poverty and inflation
- Haggai offers an explanation for their ills – they have not prioritised the things of God
- There is not time to offer a detailed examination of our own society – but we can say
- So much of the reason for the mess we are in is the place of God in our society

It is not only what is said but who is speaking that counts – this is what the LORD Almighty says

- The expression (used 14 times in this book) literally means Yahweh of hosts (angels, stars, armies?)
- It is a name used by the prophets to emphasise God’s greatness and might: God is the LORD Almighty
- The Lord Almighty says, Give careful thought (or consider) your ways (lit. ‘put your heart on your roads’)
- Society organised without God is ultimately unsatisfying and unfulfilling
- It is no good for the returned exiles just to talk about their faith, it is time to do something about it

In our society where self-interest dominates the agenda

- And people complain about how things are but scarcely give a thought as to why
- It is time to remember that judgment begins with the family of God (1 Pet. 4:17)
- That is, judgment begins with the church, thankfully we have the scriptures

II HEAR GOD'S WORD (This is what the LORD Almighty says v. 7)

Haggai uses the expression 'This is what the LORD says' or similar

- 26 times in 38 verses – what we need to ask in our society, church, heart today is:
- 'What is God saying?' The primary way of discerning what God is saying to us today is the Bible

Things take a turn for the better in Haggai because the people obeyed the voice of the Lord

- it is, of course, possible to know God's word and God's prompting in different ways
- but those ways are by their very nature the extraordinary ways
- the primary way in which God has appointed us to hear his word is through the Bible
- that is why preaching from the Bible in church and reading the Bible at home
- are of critical importance – as a result they turned from apathy and self-interest
- to the work that God had called them to do for the honour and glory of his name
- the word of God does the work of God in the people of God
- there are people who are quicker to listen to any voice other than the voice of God
- quicker to look anywhere for any word than in the word of God, we need faithful believers who will say
- 'I was studying the Bible carefully and it said this and I wonder if God's word to us is this?'

It is my conviction that it is this, more than anything else, which draws people to the church

- An engagement with the word of God, and the word of God is constant
- And the message today is this: repent, believe the good news, trust in Jesus!
- It is supremely when the word of God is heard that his people:

III EXPERIENCE GOD'S PRESENCE (I am with you declares the LORD v. 13)

There is no greater promise than this, 'I am with you declares the Lord', an unchanging promise from God

- It is the word of God that primarily announces the presence of God
- and it is the presence of God that transforms everything – our worship and our lives

I found a note under the door in a church from the meter reader, 'I am sorry that you were out when I called'

- It was an interesting theological concept – was God out when he called?
- Some Christians call their church building the house of God
- But which part of it is the house of God – the chapel, the hall, the vestry, the kitchen? Some, all, none?
- Jesus said, "I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6)
- For us, worship is no longer localised – the sacrificial altar was superseded by the cross
- The need for sacred buildings – was superseded by Pentecost
- the sacrificing priesthood – was superseded by Christ, who in his heavenly session, offers his own blood
- When the Samaritan woman at the well tried to divert Jesus about where to worship
- Jesus showed that it was *how* to worship, not *where* to worship that was important
- Those that worship must worship in Spirit and in truth, true worship is informed by true views of God
- These are given in by God's word in the Bible, in person in Jesus and enabled by the Spirit
- Haggai told the people: consider your ways, hear God's word, experience God's presence
- It is in this way that we build an edifice of living stones, to the glory of God
- The church, not a building, but a community of people; where the command is to build God's house
- With the help of God, the Judah-ite rabble would rebuild the temple; we must build God's Kingdom