

## Haggai 1. 6-15. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 6 May 2012.

Our reading this morning comes from Haggai chapter 1. Those who were here last week may recall that, following a brief introduction, we looked at verses 1 to 5. But, for completeness and to remind ourselves of the context, this morning we shall read the whole chapter.

In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: This people say, "The time has not come, the time for the house of the Lord to be built"'.

And the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 'Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?'

And now thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways. You have sown much, and bring in little. You eat, but are not satisfied; you drink, but you are not filled. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages earns wages to put them into a purse with holes'.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain and bring wood and build the house, and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, says the Lord'.

'You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew on it. Why?' declares the Lord of hosts. 'Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you run every man to his own house'.

'Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, and on the grain, and on the new wine, and on the oil, and on what the ground brings forth, and on man and on cattle, and on all the labour of your hands'.

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.

Then spoke Haggai, the Lord's messenger, in the Lord's message to the people, "I am with you", declares the Lord'.

And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king.

First, I need to pick up just a few threads from last week ...

We noted then that, under God, there were three phases to Judah's return from captivity in Babylon – the first under the leadership of Sheshbazzar ... the second under the leadership of Ezra ... and the third under the leadership of Nehemiah.

We saw that the restored exiles in the first wave immediately set about rebuilding the Temple and re-establishing the worship of Jehovah at Jerusalem, and that, having set up a restored altar there, amidst great excitement, joy and tears, they laid the foundation of the Temple itself ... but that, alas, the work of rebuilding soon came to an abrupt halt ... courtesy largely of opposition from the local Samaritan community – who, we noted, 'weakened the hands of the people of Judah, troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them', and who sustained their campaign of hostility right through until the reign of Darius – until the days of Haggai.

In all, the work of building the Temple was delayed for something like 15 years. But, as the Lord, through His prophet, pointed out to the people, He knew that there was far more to that delay than opposition from outside ... that the remnant themselves had effectively thrown in the towel, and had redirected their efforts from building God's house to beautifying their own houses – which they had finished doing and in which they were now 'dwelling'. There could hardly be a greater contrast than between the finely decorated houses they were living in and the desolate ruins they were prepared to worship in.

And this brings us to the central passage of the chapter, which occupies from verse 5 to verse 11 – a passage which falls into two sections ... both opening with the exhortation, ‘Consider your ways’ – take stock of your ways – and both focusing on the disastrous economic situation which the people had been facing for some long time.

In the first section, the Lord, through Haggai, simply states the bald facts, listing five examples of the way in which all the people’s best efforts utterly failed to meet their needs or give them satisfaction.

Abundant planting had yielded only a lean, poor harvest. The food supply had been insufficient to satisfy their hunger, and drink was in such short supply that it failed to quench their thirst. Their threadbare clothing was woefully inadequate to keep them warm during the cold nights. And, on account of spiralling inflation and scarcity of goods, prices had risen so high that their wages were now worth so little that it was as if they had been dropped into purses riddled with holes – through which their wages swiftly disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

How much wiser was the generous man of whom our Lord spoke, who, by his giving to those in need, provided himself with a purse which will never grow old – with a treasure in the heavens which will never fail.<sup>2</sup>

But, if in the first section the Lord simply states the bald facts, in the second section, with His question ‘Why?’, followed by His words, ‘Because’ and ‘Therefore’,<sup>3</sup> He spells out in unmistakable terms the link between their economic problems and their failure to build His house – telling them plainly that the difficulties they were experiencing were the direct result of His (the Lord’s) discipline on them on account of their misplaced priorities.

And in many ways the punishment fully suited the crime, for, as a chastisement on those who refused to exert themselves and their energies on building His house,<sup>4</sup> God decreed a drought which required increased labour on their part.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, I note that the chapter contains a play on words which would certainly have registered with Haggai’s original hearers ... the word translated ‘in ruins’ in verses 4 and 9 (*hareb*) is very similar in sound to that translated ‘drought’ in verse 11 (*horeb*). The second was the just consequence of the first: the ruins of the Temple through their lack of activity occasioned the drought on the land to their lack of prosperity! There may not still have been a throne in Jerusalem, but there was certainly still a throne in heaven – and the One who sat on it was just in all His ways.

From their very beginning, the nation of Israel had been taught that God’s blessing on their land – on their inheritance – was wholly dependent upon their obedience to His commands. This formed an essential part of their law covenant with Him. And it had been made abundantly clear to them that if they broke that covenant in any way they could expect to suffer both from the heaven withholding its rain and dew, and from the ground withholding its produce.<sup>6</sup> But, although the failure of their three major crops<sup>7</sup> – and much else – had coincided with their neglect of God’s house, the people had failed to make the connection – had failed to read their economic troubles as the sign of God’s providential – and disciplinary – dealings with them. And so in verses 9 to 11 the Lord points this out to them Himself.

At the hub of this passage we meet the Lord’s command, ‘Go up to the mountain and bring wood and build the house’,<sup>8</sup> and, in one sense at least, those words, ‘build the house’ take us to the very heart of His message through Haggai to the people of the day. ‘Go ... bring ... build’ were His words, with the promised outcome that He (the Lord) would both find pleasure in the completed temple and be glorified in it – and with the clear implication that He would thereafter remove the crippling drought and would bless the labour of their hands ... which indeed He later promised to do from the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the ninth month.<sup>9</sup>

In all probability the need for wood only was due to the availability of abundant stonework from the previous Temple which had stood there – and which Temple (in common with the Hotel into which Linda and I were booked for our holiday next week) was, we read, ‘burned with fire’ – presumably leaving some at least of its impressive stonework intact.<sup>10</sup> Certainly we know that Zerubbabel and company did rebuild the Temple with ‘great stones’ as well as with ‘timber’.<sup>11</sup>

Verse 12 records the immediate response, both of the leaders and of the people in general, to the Lord’s voice through His prophet, whom (it is noted) He ‘had sent’... their response being twofold – that they ‘obeyed’ (literally, ‘listened attentively to’) His (the Lord’s) voice, and that they revered His person – attitudes which often went hand in hand in scripture.<sup>12</sup> ‘Hear and fear’ was the repeated demand of God’s covenant with Israel<sup>13</sup> – and that is precisely what the remnant of Haggai’s day did.

Immediately following on the record of His people’s twofold response to His word, we read of the Lord’s twofold response to their obedience and reverence. Namely that, first, through His ‘messenger’, He gave ‘the people’ the assurance of His presence with them – to which (with my eye on the title I have been given for this morning’s study<sup>14</sup>) we will need to come back shortly,<sup>15</sup> and that, second, He (the Lord) Himself ‘stirred up’ separately ‘the spirit of Zerubbabel, of Joshua and of all the remnant’<sup>16</sup> ... just as some sixteen years before He had not only ‘stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia’ to permit them to go up to Jerusalem to ‘build the house of the Lord’,<sup>17</sup> but had stirred up the spirit of them, God’s people, to ‘build the house of the Lord’.<sup>18</sup> And when we are privileged

to engage in any aspect of work for the Lord, we need to acknowledge that, as the apostle Paul once expressed it, 'it is God who works in' us, 'both to will and to work for His good pleasure'.<sup>19</sup>

And so the work of building God's house recommenced, we are told with great precision, 'on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king'<sup>20</sup> ... which is little more than three weeks after Haggai had relayed to Zerubbabel and Joshua the very first message which he had received from the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Now that is some going!<sup>22</sup>

I said just now that (with my eye on the title I have been given for this morning's study) we would need to come back to the divine promise and assurance given at the close of verse 13, 'I am with you, declares the Lord'.

And this short promise must rank as one of the most treasured of God's 'precious and very great promises' – as well as one of the most repeated in scripture. For these very words, 'I am with you' echo from as far back as the Lord's word to Isaac in Genesis 26,<sup>23</sup> right through to the words of our Lord Jesus to the apostle Paul in Acts 18.<sup>24</sup>

And who here today, having read here in our chapter, the Lord's command, 'Go', followed by His promise, '*I am with you*', will not instinctively beam in on our Lord's words to the eleven disciples as recorded at the close of the Gospel according to Matthew, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you. And behold, *I am with you* always (literally, 'all the days'), to the end of the age?'<sup>25</sup> And many, many times we have had our attention drawn to our Lord's repetition of that little word 'all' ... 'all authority', 'all nations', 'all things', and 'all the days'.

And there in Matthew 28, as here in Haggai 1, the Lord's promise (or perhaps I should say 'the Lord's commitment') follows – indeed rests on – the command.

And a countless company of God's servants have fallen back – and done so regularly – on our Lord's words, 'I am with you'. Let me remind you of two missionaries – both from Scotland, and both having served God in the nineteenth century ...

I speak first of a famous pioneer medical missionary and explorer in Africa – almost certainly the first European to view the Victoria Falls and who gave them the name in honour of his Queen. Yes, you may well say – in words supposedly uttered by Sir Henry Stanley at their meeting – 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume?'<sup>26</sup>

In the first volume of his autobiography,<sup>27</sup> David Livingstone tells how, on the evening of 14 January 1856, he was on the bank of the Zambesi River, surrounded by savages who were acting most suspiciously.<sup>28</sup> At any moment spears might come hurtling through the darkness. Or, for all he knew, the attack might come at dawn.

Let him tell his own story ... 'I felt some turmoil of spirit in the evening at the prospect of having all my efforts for the welfare of this great region and its teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow, who might be said to 'know not what they do' ... But I read that Jesus said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth : go ye therefore, and teach all nations ... and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world". I took this as His word of honour, and then went out to take observations of latitude and longitude, which, I think, were very successful'.

And, praise His name, the same Lord who stood alongside David Livingstone in the wilds of Africa is honour bound to be with us too! And I note that, in the good Doctor's journal, the words, 'I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world' were written in italics for emphasis.<sup>29</sup>

My second Scottish missionary is John Paton, who lived just a little later than David Livingstone.<sup>30</sup> John Gibson Paton took the gospel to the New Hebrides Islands of the South Pacific. There, facing untold dangers and constantly under threat of death, Paton preached God's word faithfully.

In his autobiography, he wrote of one occasion when a wild Chief followed him about for four hours with a loaded musket. In Livingstone's own words, 'Looking up in unceasing prayer to our ... Lord Jesus, I left all in His hands, and felt immortal till my work was done ... Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. His words, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world," became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene'.<sup>31</sup>

But, thank God, the promise 'I am (or 'I will be') with you' is not only for courageous and life-threatened missionaries ... nor only for a Jacob,<sup>32</sup> a Moses, a Joshua,<sup>33</sup> a Gideon,<sup>34</sup> a Jeremiah,<sup>35</sup> or the remnant of Haggai's day. It is for every believer here this morning – whatever our circumstances, trials and fears ... and I do mean 'whatever'. Surely we are entitled to apply to ourselves the assurance which the Lord speaks to Israel in Isaiah 43 ... 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you'.<sup>36</sup>

Yes, He still speaks to His people today above the noise of the rushing waters, saying, in the words of our reading this morning, “I am with you”, declares the Lord’.

---

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> And I note in passing that it was not until about this time – until the Persian period, that is, that we find evidence of coined money in Palestine to any significant degree.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Haggai 1. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Haggai 1. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Haggai 1. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Lev. 26. 18-20; Deut. 11. 17; 28. 20-23; cf. Deut. 28. 38-40.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 7. 13; 11. 14; Hosea 2. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Haggai 1. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ezra 2. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Kings 25.9; 2 Chron. 36. 18; Jer. 52. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ezra 5. 8; cf. 6. 4.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Deut. 6. 2; 13. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Deut. 13. 11; 17. 13; 19. 20.

<sup>14</sup> ‘I am with you’.

<sup>15</sup> Haggai 1. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Haggai 1. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ezra 1. 1-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ezra 1. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Phil. 2. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Haggai 1. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Haggai 1. 1.

<sup>22</sup> And subsequent developments only served to confirm to ‘the remnant of the people (Haggai 1. 14) that they were right to resume the building work and to ignore any potential external opposition, because, when one Tattenai, the governor of the Persian province, officially challenged their actions and referred the matter to King Darius, Darius, having consulted the terms of Cyrus’s original decree, himself decreed, not only that the work should be left alone, but that all necessary expenses of the work be met immediately out of government taxes (Ezra 5. 3 to 6. 13). The remnant were therefore left in no doubt, as is noted in the relevant passage in the Book of Ezra, that ‘the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews’ (Ezra 5. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Gen. 26. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 18. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 28. 18-20.

<sup>26</sup> David Livingstone (19 March 1813 – 1 May 1873).

<sup>27</sup> Entitled, ‘Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa’. The quotation comes from chapter 29.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Mburuma’s people had behaved so suspiciously, that ... we were by no means sure that we should not be attacked in crossing the Loangwa. We saw them here collecting in large numbers’.

<sup>29</sup> See ... <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1039/1039-h/1039-h.htm#2HCH0029>

<sup>30</sup> John Gibson Paton (24 May 1824 - 28 January 1907).

<sup>31</sup> In full, ‘A wild Chief followed me about for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me ... I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in His hands, and felt immortal till my work was done. Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each other’s heels. Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. His words, “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world,” became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene’. John G. Paton, ‘Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography’, published by Robert Carter and Sons, Chapter VIII – ‘Under the Axe’, pages 191-192.

<sup>32</sup> Gen. 28. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Deut. 31. 23; Josh. 1. 5; 3. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Judg. 6. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Jer. 1. 8, 19; 15. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Isa. 43. 2.