

Haggai

Preface.

Don't be put off, this minor prophet's book, packed with up to date lessons in faith, is only 2 chapters long.

This is God's instruction to Zerubbabel, Joshua the High Priest and Israel, 18 years after the return out of exile in Babylon. For more information about that, read the books of Nehemiah and Ezra. They focus on the journey out of Israel and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Governor Zerubbabel - Jehoachin's (last king of Judah) grandson, 1 Chronicles 3:19. Born in Babylon during the exile (587 - 539 BC). Appointed by the Babylonians and travelled with the first wave of returning exiles - Ezra 1:1-2, on the orders of King Cyrus. This was a fulfilment of Jeremiah 29:14.

Joshua son of Jozadak the High Priest is mentioned in greater length in Zechariah 3:1-10, especially verses 8-10, a Messianic prophecy.

Immediately upon the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, they got to work on the rebuilding of the walls overcoming local opposition and a spectacular job under the supervision of Nehemiah. Back then the walls were essential for keeping bandits and marauding armies out, especially given all the gold and silver artefacts in the temple. In Ezra 1:9 there are listed 5,400 articles of gold and silver.

In Ezra chapter 3, it took 7 months to build the altar. Chapter 4. The work on the building of the temple started. Enemies, people who'd been drafted in by the Assyrians to fill the vacuum caused by the deportation of the Jews to Assyria and Babylon and who had adopted the Jewish faith offered to help build the temple but their offer was snubbed. These people later became known as the Samaritans. Thereafter they made every attempt to frustrate the building and eventually they managed to convince King Xerxes to issue an order compelling the Jews to stop building. The building stopped, 15 years later Xerxes died and his son Darius acceded the throne. That's when our story kicks in.

Haggai 1

This was a period when there was no great rebellion against God, there was no mass worshipping of weird fictional cult gods imported from the neighbouring countries, rather people were concentrating on improving their material wealth, this despite a series of economic setbacks, namely blight, mildew and hail which caused a huge reduction in crop yields. Can we maybe relate to this situation with recession, Brexit, Covid, inflation, cost of living crisis?

This was what God had to say to the people of Judah. Haggai 1:1-5. The problem here was that God had been relegated in the affections of the people, they were in survival mode. They wanted nice houses and that was their priority, the rebuilding of the temple was put on the to do list. 'Now's not the right time we need to wait' I've experienced more than once, church deacons that are risk averse to a fault. If we can't find a reason not to then we'll think about it. Now's not the right time

What Haggai was explaining to Zerubbabel and Joshua was that the root of their financial difficulties lay in their priorities. If you could only rebuild the Temple, God wants to bless you. The Temple clearly meant a lot to God, let's look at the history of the temple.

First mention was 2 Samuel 7:1-3 King David's complaint, he's in a Palace, God's in a tent. Prophet Nathan gives him the OK but that permission was withdrawn overnight. David was too associated with wreaking war, blood and guts and the job of construction was to be given to his successor. Ironically, then was not the right time. Solomon indeed completed the building in 1000 BC, let's read the dedication of the Temple, 1 Kings 8:22-29. The Temple stood until 586 when it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

In Ezra chapters 6 and 7 the Jews received royal decrees from Darius and Artaxerxes to build the Temple along with promises of the return of looted gold and silver as well as further contributions from the royal coffers. So, work started on the rebuild. Note, this is the only recorded occasion in the Old Testament that the Holy Spirit was given out to people en masse; not quite everyone, just those who were working on the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra 1:5. The Holy Spirit had been given to kings, prophets and heroes, but not en masse.

Haggai 2: 1-8, God asks the OAPs, 'Who remembers the first Temple? The thing is, nostalgia ain't what it used to be, is it? We older ones can inadvertently discourage the contemporary generation with rose coloured recollections of past revivals, Billy Graham crusades, full churches etc.

The codgers in Haggai's time were complaining, 'This building ain't a patch on the original Temple.' Well God promises the Jews that whilst the second Temple might have lacked the grandeur and opulence of the first, nevertheless God promises the people:

'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." Haggai 2:9 NIV. In what way would the glory of the second Temple be greater than the first? Well, in the second Temple God would physically visit it in the form of Jesus, His son. Luke 2:6, John 7:14, John 8:2.

In Haggai 2:11-14 God explains through Haggai where the Jews had gone wrong, using His food laws to illustrate His point. He told them that some things they were doing were right but the right was being cancelled out by the wrong. Do we as a church examine ourselves asking; what are we doing right and what are we doing wrong, or even you as an individual? Is any part of our/your sacrifice defiled? Are we/you missing out on God's blessings? It's when you seek God's wisdom and have an honest debate with yourself and address any issues that need improving, from that day forth, God will bless us/you.

Now that Israel's following God's will, God promises them and blesses them, and especially that guy Zerubbabel who played a pivotal role in the nation's renaissance. A promise to destabilize the powers that still ruled over Israel albeit with some autonomy. God calls Zerubbabel his 'signet ring'.

This second temple lasted 500 years. It was refurbished and extended by Herod the Great who reigned between 37 BC - 4 AD as a way of ingratiating himself with the religious elite and it clearly worked. Despite the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem the Pharisees remained quite deferential to his heir and successor. The temple was totally demolished by the Romans in 70 AD as punishment for a Jewish rebellion.

So why have you spent the last hour ruminating on the rebuilding of the tower that was demolished nearly 2000 years ago and has been superseded by the Al-Aqsa Mosque? Let's read 1 Corinths 6:19. You are that Temple. What you've been reading and discussing applies equally to you individually as it did to the Temple built by Haggai and Ezra. And I suggest that the same applies to our church which is also a place where we come to offer sacrifice in the form of praise and worship.