

# Stop and Think

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning, everyone. That's a great response. Everybody's awake. That's great! He doesn't know the answer to the question, and that's why he's asking it.

He wants to know what the answer is. And if you blokes in this room or anything like me, when you go to Sainsbury's, you have a sort of set route, you know, up and down. You've got a set timetable. You're going to do it quickly. You're not going to sort of hang about. You just want to get it done and get home. But then your wife puts something on the list, and you haven't got a clue what it is.

And you think, well, what am I going to do about this? And so you need to ask a question. You genuinely want to know where this thing is. And we don't like doing that, do we? We don't like asking someone the way or whatever.

But we're forced to because we really want to know the answer. Where is this wretched thing that I've got to find? So we asked some staff member, and they said, aisle 13 down there.

[ 1 : 28 ] So you go and you get it. So you really want to know that answer. There are other types of questions. A rhetorical question, where somebody poses a question, and they don't really want you to answer.

You may remember a couple of weeks ago, Johan, our pastor here, asked a question. Is anyone here a sci-fi fan? And there was a shout from the corner there, no!

So, that was our Tom. And he's severely autistic, and so he takes it literally. If someone asks a question, you've got to answer it. So he did. But there you go.

That's a rhetorical question. But there's another type of question, where the questioner actually wants you to learn something from the questions. Jesus was an expert at this.

He would always pose a question to get the person he was speaking to to think about the subject he wanted to get across. And that's what we have here in this chapter.

[ 2 : 30 ] We have these two rather curious questions. And God poses through his prophet Haggai some technical questions from the law of Moses, the sort of national law of the country at the time.

And he poses these questions to the priests. And they're the religious leaders. They're supposed to be the legal experts of the day to interpret the law and what it means.

So, he's asking the people really to stop and think where they are. Things have gone wrong for them in a big way, really, and they needed to change.

And I think it's important. You might think, well, this was a long time ago. What relevance does that have to us today? But I think it's important for us to grasp what God is actually saying to us through these questions and try and understand it.

Because we shall see that's how we can experience the outpouring of God's blessing and God's grace upon us and upon our lives. So, listen hard.

[ 3 : 38 ] Sometimes we need challenging, don't we? I certainly do. Because we become very complacent with our lives. And we don't always realise the true danger that we're in.

Maybe that describes us this morning. I can always remember as a small child, I was a bit of a dreamer. My sister always told me that. And my dad decided it was time to teach me a lesson about crossing the road.

And how to do it safely. And as you can imagine, we were wandering on the high street in Selston and he suggested we should cross the road.

And so with hands in pockets, I sort of wandered out into the road. And he said, Michael! Stop! As you can see, I never forgot it.

And then very quietly, as a father, he explained to me what the dangers were of crossing the road. So we didn't wander out into oncoming traffic and so on.

[ 4 : 41 ] We certainly had the desired effect. God, as our father, is warning us this morning to stop and think. Stop and think. What we're doing with our lives.

How committed is our relationship to him? And what priority we're giving to him and his kingdom. So to get the full impact of our passage, we need to start with a quick look at the historical context of what we're speaking about this morning.

We need to remember that in the Old Testament, God's actual presence was found in the Holy of Holies, in the temple. In the physical temple. Not so today, but that's how it was then.

And since Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed that temple, we have read about it in the past, in Nehemiah. It meant that his relationship with them had become detached.

The people had become detached from his immediate presence. And so that relationship somehow needed to be restored between God and his people.

[ 5 : 52 ] The temple had to be rebuilt. Eighteen years earlier, the Jews, a small number in relation to the total number of them, had been in captivity in Babylon.

And they'd been given specific permission by King Cyrus of Persia, who'd taken over the kingdom. And interestingly, that's Iran today. And they'd been given to Jerusalem. And to return to Jerusalem. And to resettle and rebuild the temple. Two years later, they actually started to build the temple. But after a while, the opposition around them became so great, they became discouraged.

Does that sound familiar? They became discouraged and they stopped building. You'll see all about that in another book called Ezra, Ezra chapter 4. So the thing had stopped.

The work had stopped. And God's presence in the temple wasn't found. Fast forward 16 years and here we are. They become so focused on building their own houses.

[ 7 : 01 ] They're posh houses, panelled houses, it said. We saw earlier when we were looking at this a week or two back. Living their own lives. They had no real interest in restarting the temple building project.

It wasn't on their agenda. They thought they were doing okay spiritually, really. They would offer sacrifices, the occasional sacrifice from time to time.

But their hearts weren't in it. And God was largely ignored by them. It was kind of all lip service.

There was no real heart and soul into worshipping God and serving him.

And so God intervened. He's a loving Heavenly Father. Our God. And he had our best interests at heart. And he had the best interests of these people in his heart.

And he wanted to stop them and make them think what was going on. So he intervened through Haggai and the rebuilding started. They returned to him.

[ 8 : 03 ] And they started rebuilding the temple. We've already seen that in the last couple of sermons on this. But now we come to the third prophecy. The 24th day of the ninth month in the second year of Darius, Darius' reign.

Verse 10. And here we have the laying of a foundation stone for a new building. If we think about it, the laying of a foundation stone, particularly for a religious building, is a day to mark.

It's a day to keep in the calendar and to remember as time goes forward. And you may know those of you that are familiar with this.

We have a partnership with a church in Nepal. And not long ago, we helped supply some resources for them to build this training center, Bible training center, to help all the leaders in that area of Nepal, up in the Himalayan foothills, about nine little churches.

And the leader of the work from Kathmandu there with a red t-shirt on, that's Pastor Dharma, and his wife there with her hands up, Jalapa.

[ 9 : 16 ] And they had this little ceremony on the terrace where they were going to build this training center. And you can see the guy there holding the foundation stone and putting the foundation stone.

And that was a day to remember. And then they worshipped God and prayed and asked his blessing on the future of the training center. And it was a sign of the commitment of the people to this building project, to get it started and keep at it until it was completed.

So the laying of a foundation stone is a key date, really. And this is what this passage is about. The people are gathered for a ceremony to lay this foundation stone, the rebuilding of the temple.

And Zerubbabel, the governor, was there. And Joshua, the high priest, and the other priests gathered around. And then Haggai delivers his prophecy to them. So he poses these two big questions on the law for the priest to answer.

This is what the Lord Almighty says. Ask the priest what the law says. If someone carries a consecrated meat in the fold of their garment and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?

[10:28] So what you've got to imagine here is the person, you know, living in their panelled house. They're going to sacrifice a lamb or something with the priest.

They've gone along. The priest had done what they do, the sacrifice. And the meat becomes consecrated at that point. It's a kind of fellowship offering.

And then they could take what they used to do. They didn't have carrier bags in those days. They used to sort of put the shopping in there, the cloak or robe that they were dressed in.

So you can imagine this person coming along, coming home. As he comes home, he brushes against the table and on the table there's some wine and a loaf of bread and oil or whatever.

And so the question is, is the things that he's touched, do they become consecrated as a result of the consecrated meat that he's got in his robe?

[11:32] Good question. In a way, we, and it's not absolutely clear in the Old Testament, in the law, but the priests answered, they say, no.

You cannot transfer that consecration from the meat to the other products. They were right. You can, apparently. The clothing that you carry the meat in becomes consecrated, but not if you touch something else, a kind of secondary cleansing.

So that was their interpretation of the law. And quite right. No, you can't transfer. The second question is much more straightforward. If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?

The law was quite clear on this. Yes, say the priests. That's an easy one. Of course it becomes defiled. Leviticus 22, 4-6. Well, there you have it.

So what on earth do these questions mean for us? And that's a rhetorical question, by the way. Haggai explains, So it is with this people and this nation in my sight.

[12:46] Quite a serious accusation here, declares the Lord. Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled. The problem was that they were labouring under the illusion that if they made the occasional sacrifice, they paid lip service to God's laws, But the rest of the time they were pleasing themselves, looking after their own interests, doing their own thing.

Somehow the small sacrifices they were making in their lives would transfer the goodness to the rest of your life. Being upright and clean in one part of your life doesn't transfer that goodness to the rest of your life.

That's the point of it. But on the other hand, conversely, just one sin defiles the whole person. So that even our good deeds are tainted by sin.

And that's quite a difficult thing to take in. Oh, I think I'm doing all right here. I'm being good. I'm helping my neighbour or doing what I'm doing. Does that actually mean anything in terms of pleasing God?

And what God is reminding them here is that we really need a change of heart. It's about what's going on in here that's important. We need that change of heart for our lives to be fully cleansed.

[14:05] And that's the point. And it's a trap that we can all fall into. We can be deceived into thinking that provided we do a few good deeds or come to church now and again perhaps or whatever, God will somehow be pleased with us and owe it to us that we should be accepted and cleansed.

But the rest of the time we're pleasing ourselves, doing our own thing, doing what we want. If we spend our time just living for ourselves without reference to God, even the good that we do can be contaminated and it is.

So we might ask, so what does God expect of us? Can you see how this is evolving? It's time to stop and think. Where is our life now? How committed am I to God and to his service?

Well, the second point is that we come to the pivotal point of our text. It's in verse 15. And here we have this little phrase, careful thought.

Now give careful thought. Stop and think. From this day on, consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple.

[15:22] So they got back to building the temple. Three months previously, they'd actually started the work. They gathered all the stones and everything else they needed together.

And they started laying one stone on another. So God was actually asking them at this point to think carefully about how things had been before that. In other words, during these 16 years that the building work had stopped, where they'd, in a sense, drifted away from him.

You must understand that most of the people there gathered in front of them would have been subsistence farmers. And they would have known that in the last 16 years, their harvests have been disappointing.

We see, recorded there, that the yields were only about half or less of what they'd expected. And the disease and the weather had taken its toll.

Life had been a real struggle over the 60s. You know, it hadn't just been going all their way over those 16 years. And what they hadn't really clocked was that that was God's way of trying to bring them to their senses, that they deserted him.

[16:31] They turned their backs on him to some extent. And that he wanted them to give that priority to the building of his temple again. And put that priority into their lives.

And he says, I struck all the work of your hands over that period. God says, yet you didn't return to me. In a sense, I was pleading with you to come back to me and you didn't.

And the reason for that is that God is wanting a real relationship with his people, not just sort of lip service or doing things to please him, which don't.

He wants us to love him with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our mind. And to get our priorities right in our lives in serving him. And is that a picture of us?

Where we put all our energies and our time, priorities into feathering our own nest, doing our own thing, gratifying our own desires, without really recognising that God is the giver of everything that we have.

[17:34] Our love for him and our devotion to the growth of his kingdom has grown cold or it's non-existent. We're not putting him first in our lives. And when we look back and give careful thought as to whether we're any more content with the life that we've got now, if all the stuff that we've accumulated and the things we strive for have brought us real happiness, a real contentment in our hearts and minds, the shalom that we've spoken about in earlier passages here.

Do we have that real peace in our heart, that contentedness? And sometimes we need to realise how dissatisfied we are. So it's quite sort of serious, this, isn't it, really, to make us stop and think, where are our priorities?

Seek first the kingdom of heaven and his righteousness, Jesus says, and all these things will be added to you. We now come to the most astonishing part of this passage, and it's the good part. It's also the most thrilling, really. The precise date that God now emphasises, the 24th day of the ninth month, that's actually the 18th of December, so the middle of winter in our calendar.

It's a turning point in the narrative in verse 18. Prior to that, God's judgment was on the people for not returning to him, not repenting of their sin, turning their back on that and turning back towards him, that sin of neglect.

[19:13] But on this day, this was the day of the laying of the foundation stone of the building of the Lord's temple again, and God says again, give careful thought to this day, think hard.

Understand what it means. Look, he says, is there any seed left in your barns? And as I say, December the 18th, midwinter, so the middle of winter, they'd used up all their seed, sowing in the autumn for next year's crops, and they had none left.

Their barns were empty. They come to the end of their own resources. And what will the future hold? Up to now the figs and the pomegranate trees hadn't borne fruit.

It was still the middle of winter, so the future looked pretty bleak, unless God actually opened up his storehouses of blessing on them, which he hadn't done over the last 16 years.

And so you just imagine the prophet Haggai standing there before the priests and all the people as they laid the foundation stone. And he shouts in a loud voice, this is what God says to you, from this day on, I will bless you.

[20:29] That's remarkable, isn't it? Yes, you're a simple people, you've rejected me, you've turned your back on me for 16 years, but you've come back to rebuild the temple. You've repented.

And you've returned to me. I love you. I will be gracious to you. I will keep my covenant with you. I will bless you. Extraordinary, isn't it?

It doesn't depend on us. It all depends on God's grace and his wonderful love towards us, to his people, to bring us back, to make us stop and think and bring us back to our senses.

What can we learn from this today then? We've seen over the past two weeks, for us the temple is Jesus in our day. Jesus himself and his church. He is the foundation stone of God's temple.

That stone was laid, wasn't it? On the day that our saviour Jesus willingly went to the cross and to bear the consequence of God's judgment on all our sins.

[ 21 : 38 ] So we didn't have to bear that punishment ourselves. The good stuff we do in our lives is it's just not good enough to save us. Our good deeds just can't be transferred to make us clean before this holy God that we worship.

When we sin just once, our whole being is somehow defiled since the day when Adam fell in the garden. We need someone outside of ourselves who never sinned to pay the price for us to accept God's punishment that we should take.

And on that day, that's the foundation day, if you like, the laying of the foundation stone when Jesus hung on that cross and said, this work is finished. He took the punishment we deserve.

He set us free to receive all the blessings of a restored relationship with our God the Father. He laid the foundation stone for us.

as we turn to him and we put our trust in him and trust our lives to him, put him first in our lives. On that day, we are forgiven.

[ 22 : 51 ] And he'll pour out his blessing on our lives. Blessing after blessing after blessing and it doesn't stop at the end of our lives. It goes on into all eternity where the blessing's even greater.

Isn't that amazing? It's fantastic. And maybe, there may be one or two here who do something, what is all this about? Just put your trust in this Jesus.

He is the foundation stone of your life. Will you entrust your lives to him and put him first? For Christians, you know, maybe today is the day to take stop of our lives as believers.

Realise that the things of this world that we're constantly striving after, very legitimately, we need to. We need to provide for our families. We need to live. So there's nothing particularly wrong in that, but if that's the only thing we're striving for, it's not good enough.

It can never bring true contentment as I think many of us, when we get to my stage in life, we realise. So how committed are we to God and our relationship with him?

[ 23 : 56 ] How are we building that relationship with him? What priority are we giving to worshipping and serving him? Are we seeking first his kingdom? It is significant that what God prompted him to discipline his people was that they had stopped building the temple.

That was a thing that had disappointed him, it had grieved him. And as Christians, we have this enormous privilege this morning of being called by Jesus to be fully engaged in the work of building his temple, the church, stone by stone with Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone, as Paul tells us. He holds the whole building together and we're building this marvellous building of the church of Christ. So how committed am I?

How committed are you to build to this project of temple building? Have we lost interest and become perhaps discouraged? It's hard work, it's difficult.

And I'm sure these people in those days found it difficult lumping stones around. so we may become discouraged. But is it our first priority in our giving, in the use of our time, in our passion to see more stones added to the building until it's finally completed and prepared like a bride, the Bible says, like a bride, ready for the return of our Saviour Jesus when he comes back.

[ 25 : 34 ] Will we, if he came back tomorrow, will we be happily engaged in the building of his temple? I can tell you from personal experience that there's nothing more thrilling or satisfying, is there, to be actively engaged in God's work, to see others coming to know Jesus, our friends, our neighbours, our family, and experiencing the blessing that we've known.

There's nothing better than that, is there? receiving the blessing of God, not just for this life, but for all eternity. So if we, today, we resolve to put him first again in our lives, God's message to us today is this, from this day on, I will bless you.

I will bless you. I'll pour out my blessing on your lives, not just for now, but for all eternity. So I just want to close with these words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth.

They've been a pretty bad lot, really. They got things wrong in the church, and he was ticking them off to some extent. And after he explained everything to them, he said, therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm.

Let nothing move you. always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

[ 27:05 ] Amen.