

When the World is Shaking

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[0 : 00] Please have your Bibles open at Haggai, page 949 on the Church Bibles if you've got one of those.

And we're looking at the end of chapter 2 together. Before we do that, let's pray. Father, this is your word, we believe, and therefore we need your help.

We want to hear your voice. Father, we can only do that as your Spirit opens our ears. Father, we know that naturally we want to have the microphone ourselves.

We want our word to be the final word. And naturally, Lord, our Spirit does not submit to your Spirit. So we come and ask for your help, your mercy.

Lord, we need your word to feed us, guide us, and comfort us. And we pray that you would do that this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Reading the news this week, looking around the world.

[1 : 10] You get scared. I got a bit scared this week. Everything that's happening. Don't know, maybe for you it's the local, personal things.

How will I make it through tomorrow? Where's my next paycheck coming from? I have to make dinner. I have no idea what I'm going to make it with. How's it going to go in my kids' lives, or my parents' life, or my spouse's, my partner's life?

But I guess it's just as easy to get worried about the global things, isn't it? Maybe because God's been good to us in this country for so long and in so many ways.

Maybe it's the bigger things, actually, that are more worrying. Wars being started. Wars being started. Terrorism. Will AI take my job? I haven't got one to write a sermon for me yet.

I'm a bit scared to do that. What will the world be like in ten years? These are big things. They're all out of our hands, aren't they? The power to fix that or influence that stuff is in the hands of a very small group of people very far away.

[2 : 24] That's what it feels like, isn't it? And that is scary. I think wanting to control stuff and not being able to, and also not being able to let go, I think that's one of the basic problems that we all have as human beings.

The feeling that it's in the hands of someone who isn't us. A bit like this. Recognize this from the Lord of the Rings. It's from a scene where there's a whole crowd of wise men and warriors standing around.

And the ring of power on which the fate of the world rests is put in the hands of a halfling, of a hobbit.

And then there's this line. You carry the fate of us all now, little one. The fate of the world, and it's in someone else's hands. If you know the film, you know how that torments Boromir, the man who says that line.

The reason we're worried often is because we feel we're only really safe if that power is in my hand. Not in the hands of someone who isn't big enough, or strong enough, or good enough to deal with it, competent.

[3 : 46] Not if it's in the hands of someone else. That thinking kind of goes like this. My career in the hands of that boss? My kids' health and happiness in the hands of that teacher?

That social worker? That little group of people I care about so much in the hands of that leader? My safety in the hands of that orange lunatic?

Or that godless liberal? My happiness in the hands of that spouse? Any of that in any hands but my own?

No thanks. God has words to say to us in that place of fear and that illusion of control that we have. But before we get to the final verses of Haggai, which is where we are, let's look back briefly.

Just help us remember where we are. If you remember in this chapter, in chapter 2, Haggai has reminded us that God addresses the fears of his people, that his temple, which is the symbol of his presence with them, the centre of the world, really, their fears that they won't be able to rebuild it and that everything will come to nothing.

[5 : 11] And he's promised in the middle of that fear to bring about that whole person, whole world peace. And Mike reminded us about that peace last week and he reminded us as well from the previous words in this chapter, there's an opportunity, a call to stop and think.

Using those two legal questions from the Jewish law, which at first glance just seem so irrelevant to us. And actually it turns out there's an invitation to remember that God says our good deeds are not good enough to make us good people.

And our sin seeps into everything. And yet, even though we don't listen to God's many messages scattered throughout our lives, this message, that friend, that conversation, God has said he will bless his people.

And that's grace, isn't it? And that's great. But there's still a question. How will God do that? How will he bless us?

How will he do that but permanently? Right? Sure, the temple may be rebuilt, great, but what difference will that really make in 100, 200, 500 years?

[6 : 27] What difference will that make anyway? So maybe God will reverse the famine that Israel are experiencing, the bad circumstances that we're in the middle of, and maybe he'll rebuild.

But what good is a season of plenty after a season of pain if it doesn't last? Can you help me, God, with the fundamental problem that someone else is holding the ring of power?

The temple and the house of David are for the world what shows that God has chosen this people. And we've been talking about the temple, but in this last section, Haggai turns from the temple and he starts to talk about the royal house.

And on the day the foundation of the temple is laid, the same day that the prophecy that Mike was explaining to us was received, God speaks again. Let's look at verse 20.

The word of the Lord came to Haggai a second time on the 24th day of the month. And when God speaks, he speaks in order to reassure his people and to warn the world.

[7 : 44] So God speaks again. And then let's read verses 21 and 22. Tell Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth.

I will overturn royal thrones and scatter the power of foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers. Horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.

I've been paying attention. You'll recognize that language of shaking. So God is confirming what he says will happen in chapter 2, verse 6.

He will shake the heavens and the earth. In other words, this situation of feeling small while others determine our fate will not last.

God is going to do something about it. So what we should expect to happen if we're Haggai and Israel is that at some point there's going to be a total upheaval of the world as they know it.

[8 : 41] And that's what happens. Within 200 years, the ancient Near Eastern world is rocked when the Persian Empire falls as it's conquered by Alexander the Great. So the same thing that happens to every empire, even the Christian ones, happens to this one.

It falls. And when Haggai describes what that would be like, he uses phrases to remind us of how God has worked in the past.

So that word overturn, that's how the sexually liberated cities of Sodom and Gomorrah met their end. That word shattering, that's what was done to the Canaanite nations who sacrificed their children to their gods for their own comfort.

And the overthrow of the chariots, horses and riders, if you know your Bible, that's what happened to the military technology of the genocidal empire of Egypt. It's not hard to draw lines, is it?

From that to now. So this shaking, that Haggai talks about, happened to that empire. But it is also yet to happen. And to understand that, we need to know how Old Testament prophecy works.

[9 : 59] We've talked about the already and the not yet. We've been looking at Haggai, haven't we? Every prophecy has a fulfillment in time for those people then, and a greater fulfillment in eternity for us all in Jesus.

And the Israelites knew that. That's why this book is still around. That's why they didn't just chuck it after the Persian empire fell. Haggai looks beyond this day to that day, which is the day on which

Jesus returns again.

That's what the Bible calls the day of judgment, when the world will be shaken for a final time. And that day, there will be no more ayatollahs, there will be no more prime ministers, there will be no more shahs, there will be no more presidents, Russian or American.

There will be no more nukes or ballistic missiles or mining ships or drone attacks. The great empires of the earth will be shaken.

And that's not God messing up our neatly ordered world, that's God saying, your world is such a mess that if I'm going to reorder it, I have to shake it first.

[11 : 11] So what we learn is that the world will always be shaking, won't it? Because there will always be evil empires.

And the call for Christians is to do the same as it has always been for God's people, which is to trust the sovereign hand and final judgment of our God who promises to build his temple, that's us.

Here's how the New Testament puts it. At that time, his voice shook the earth, that's speaking about Haggai. But now he has promised, once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.

The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken, that is, created things, stuff we build. So that we cannot, that what cannot be shaken, what God builds, may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. And so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

[12 : 18] And if that's what's coming, then that's another reminder, isn't it, to do what Haggai has been saying the whole time, which is to consider our ways, to give careful thought to our priorities, to prioritize showing reverence and awe to our God, to seek first his kingdom.

And if you're not a believer here today, friends, then it's a reminder, an invitation, to come and worship this awesome God who describes himself as a consuming fire.

But it's also a reason for hope, isn't it? Because this is what God will do to that very small group of people so very far away who hold all the power. We know that because he's done similar things before the exile, since the exile, and after.

We know because of what happened to Jesus. Do you remember what happened when Jesus died and he was in the tomb and then he rose? That was accompanied by an earthquake, a shaking of the earth.

God is saying no human hand will hold the ring of power any longer. Which also means that we won't be holding it.

[13 : 41] So who will? Let's read verse 23. On that day, declares the Lord Almighty, I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, declares the Lord, and I will make you like my signet ring for I have chosen you, declares the Lord Almighty.

I will take you, Zerubbabel, and I will make you my signet ring for I have chosen you. And we're thinking, so what? Zerubbabel, he's a minor government official in a backwater province, heir of a cast-off royal line a million miles from here.

So what? Friends, the significance of any human being can only be truly understood in the context of their relationship to Jesus Christ.

So what is Zerubbabel's significance? Well, we read about it. Mike read it for us. From Matthew chapter 1, verses 12 to 6. Zerubbabel is the forefather of Jesus.

Zerubbabel's significance is that as a son of David, he represents Jesus. In other words, these words about Zerubbabel mean something for Zerubbabel and his people then, but they also mean something much more about Jesus and for us now.

[15 : 08] So what we need to hear when we hear Haggai speaking to Zerubbabel is God the Father making a promise to King Jesus.

And that matters for us as Christians because we're one with Jesus, aren't we? All our hopes are bound up in him. The Bible says when he dies, we die.

When he rises, we rise. His kingdom, our kingdom. What happens to him happens to us somehow. And you can see that in the language here. Zerubbabel is God's chosen as David was God's chosen as Jesus is God's chosen as we are chosen in him.

So what does God say to Jesus? I will make you like my signet ring. Now, just a brief aside.

Some Christians will say here that we learn that God achieves his holy kingdom building purposes through civil rulers like Zerubbabel. So we should throw our weight behind politicians who've been appointed by God because they are prophetically fulfilling God's will.

[16:19] That's what some will say. But that misses the whole context of Haggai, doesn't it? Which is that God's people are not building a holy empire. God is building his temple.

And some people will say, yes, that means for us another temple in Jerusalem because that will lead to that day coming and the return of Jesus.

But that misses the point, doesn't it? No human building project is going to lead to the shaking of the heavens. It's God's choice of time and place for that.

And we've seen from the New Testament all the way through that we are God's temple. It's us he's building and we just saw from Hebrews that no physical building will stand. Created things are shaken.

So we don't throw our weight behind a civil leader or a building project but behind Jesus who is God with us, the temple in the flesh. One of the commentators puts it like this, the best protection for any nation, the surest guarantee of its political existence is a living, working church in its midst.

[17:35] Okay, tangent over. So, back to the ring. What does that mean? What is this business about a ring? Well, for those of you who don't love history, as I do, it might help to know that a signet ring contains someone's authority.

It's used to seal documents, back up the royal messages, prove the royal identity. It basically represents the king. And if you're struggling with that idea, then think of this.

Think of your phone, right? It's a little bit like a signet ring. A little bit. Connects you to your authorisations, doesn't it? Your identity documents, your bank cards.

Carries your fingerprint, your face ID, delivers your messages for you, stores your tickets so that you can get through the barriers into places. A little bit like a signet ring, isn't it?

No phone, no connection to any of that. No signet ring, no connection to your legacy, your identity, no authority, no safety, no entry, no ring of power, no deal.

[18:47] There is such a ring, a real one, like the one in the Lord of the Rings.

Only it's not one that looks like this. Instead it's a person who embodies all God's good promises. Jesus is like that ring. And you know the sad thing is the last that God's people had heard of this ring, it had been taken away from them. And as far as they knew, it was never coming back. Lost forever.

If you were to turn to Jeremiah chapter 22, verse 24, just as the Israelites are about to go into the exile they've come back from here in Haggai, here are the words, surely as I live, declares the Lord, even if you, Jehoiakim, son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, he's a rubber boy's great, great grandfather.

Even if you were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. No ring, no connection, no hope, and that's where we are without Jesus.

[20:01] Whether we know it or not, whether we care or not, that's where we are. You know the film? We're like Gollum, wailing in the dark, that we've lost our precious.

And if we don't know it now, then we certainly will when God returns to shake the heavens and the earth. See, and that's how God's people in Haggai have felt for years.

Where's the ring? But now it's like the signet ring is given back to God's people, and God recommits to his promise to save his people through a man from the house of David.

Verse 23. So behind the time-bound figures of Haggai and Terubbabel, we see the timeless figures of the Father and the Son.

And in these words, God says to Jesus, when I come back at the end of time, in the midst of the worldwide earthquake, in which my total control is revealed, I will take you, my Son, and I will make you my signet ring, and all of you who follow him, I will make like him, because I have chosen you.

[21:20] You will have your name, you will have your meaning, you will have your hope, you will have your Saviour. Who is it who truly carries the fate of us all in his hands?

Who can we turn to when we're scared about what will happen when we step outside our front door? When our health and happiness and that of those that we love seem to be in the hands of other people, little people, far away, where can we look?

Whose voice do we need to listen to when we are grappling for control over things that we cannot control? Who will give us permanent safety and happiness beyond the tide of the seasons of pain and plenty?

Who will shake the heavens and the earth? Who has chosen you, Christian, in all of this? Whose spirit is given to us as a deposit of our royal inheritance like a signet ring?

The answer to all of these things? Jesus. So as the world shakes around us, and it will be shaken again, we trust in the one who represents a God who judges and saves and makes good on his promises.

[22 : 45] In other words, when the world is shaken, we trust in Jesus. Let's pray. Father, it is so easy for us to slip into the illusion that we control.

It is so easy to slip into grasping for that control which we could never wield even if we had it. It is so easy to lose hope in the face of the world where other people seem to have that control and use it badly.

Thank you for the words from this ancient book. Thank you, Lord, that the ring of power is on the hand of your Son, the Lord Jesus, and that in his hand are justice and mercy, grace and forgiveness for each of us.

Please help us to put our trust in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.