

How does it look now?

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[0 : 00] In our reading from Haggai chapter 2 and the verses 3 to 7, the prophet Haggai delivers a message to Israel. And as I tried to outline with the children, they are faced with a great difficulty because the temple and the whole of the city of Jerusalem had been razed to the ground by the Babylonians.

It had been burnt and the stones had been turned away one from the other. But it's particularly there in the middle of that passage that I want us to understand what the prophet is saying as he speaks on behalf of the Lord when he says to them, How does it look to you now?

Those who had seen the temple of Solomon coming back to the ruined pile of stones.

How does it seem to you now? And I want to do so particularly in the light of Philippians chapter 2 and verse 13 in particular.

But let me read verses 12 and 13 to you. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

[1 : 52] And especially, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. And this is a good question for us and a good statement for us in these first few weeks of a new year.

How does it look to you now? It's God who works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

We've tried to piece together over these past two weeks or so some of the things set out in Philippians 2 and in Matthew 2, especially relating to Christmas and to New Year.

Christ is our example, says Paul, having left the Father's side to come to this dark, fallen world. Coming as a servant to save us, we too are to serve him. We are to serve him. We are to serve each other.

[3 : 11] We are to serve the world. Having been saved by him, we are now to imitate him. We have been commissioned, as we've seen, to be lights here in the world.

No one says this will be easy for us. It won't be. We have an enemy who continually wars against us, seeking to destroy any work of the gospel, any witness that we may have.

But it is God who brings us to will and to do of his good pleasure. Behind us is God.

We are not left to do these things in our own strength. But in our weakness. He is our strength.

He is with us. Just as he says to the people in Haggai's time, be strong. I'm with you.

[4 : 26] So he says to us at the outset of 2020. Be strong. I'm with you. God is sovereign.

God is sovereign. God is sovereign. And despite apparent setbacks and troubles in the way that the church has become and the church has gone, as in times past, yet nevertheless, the church is heading for triumph.

It's heading for glory. God has planned it. He's declared it. And he will accomplish it. Without any doubt.

So as you look back over 2019, how does it look to you now? Now we can look back and see the hopes, dreams and disappointments and sorrows of a past year.

But we can also, I hope, see the way that the Lord has led us through all this checkered history and past.

[5 : 47] We can trace his hand and we can say, the Lord has been with us. I see that the Lord was there.

I didn't see it at the time, but I can see it now. It's true that there are some things that are still a mystery to us and maybe we haven't seen where the Lord has been at work.

But there are places of clarity. And we should be encouraged by that. Though things are not right and things are not well and not what they should be, yet we can bless the Lord that he has been

with us and he has not failed us.

So then as we look forward, what do we see? Some prophets of doom tell us that this year is going to be a bad year, not just for the Queen and the royal family, but for us all.

But there are others who say that 2020 is going to be a great year. What do you see? We should all expect to see God at work in us and through us.

[7 : 25] That despite setbacks and trials which there will surely be, the Lord is with us. He's with his people.

Behavioral scientists have discovered that we usually see things that we prepare ourselves to see and that this is all centered in a network of nerve cells called the reticular activating system.

And everybody has this reticular activating system. It works like this. Once something has been brought to our attention and we've been prepared to see it, we'll see it virtually everywhere we go. Let me give you an example. Supposing you've decided to buy a new car and you've decided on the make of car that you have in mind and you're going to buy a certain brand, a certain model in that manufacturer's range.

With a certain body style and certain colors. And all of a sudden you'll see these cars everywhere. You'll see them on the roads, in TV adverts, in newspapers and magazines.

[8 : 46] They're everywhere. Now they've always been there, but the moment you focus your attention to see them, your reticular activating system kicked in and suddenly you see them everywhere.

And it happens in all areas of life. We see what we are prepared to see. So are we looking for God to be working among us in and through us through us in 2020.

And if we're prepared to see him, we'll find him. But if we're prepared to see but doom and gloom, that's what we'll see.

So the question is, how does it look to you now?

Let's consider three different areas where we should look. First of all, how do you look to yourself? I don't mean what do you see in the mirror, although that's part of it, but what do you see in yourself and about yourself?

[10 : 16] When you look in the mirror, what kind of person looks back? You'll know what you look like, but what's behind the look, as it were? Is it someone who's weak?

Someone who isn't worth very much? Or do you see someone who's eager and optimistic and can hardly wait for each day to begin because there are so many things to do, especially for the Lord? What do you see when you look at yourself? Are you gloom and doom? Or is your hope in the Lord?

And are you strong in him though you are weak in yourself? And when you look in the mirror, you see someone who's weak and isn't worth very much in and of yourself, and yet, do you see that you belong to the Lord?

That he is at work in your life. He's changing you. And whilst you're not what you should be yet, you're on the way.

[11 : 30] not because of you, but because of him. It's he who is working in you to will and to do his good pleasure.

So often we hear people say things like, I can't do that. Or that's just too hard for me. Others say, I know I'm hard to get along with, but that's just the way I am.

And they rest content. I've tried to change, but I don't seem to be able to. And that's where they stop. But the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts, in our lives.

And he will bring about a dramatic and drastic change which we should allow him to do.

He is molding us and making us into those who imitate Christ. He will enable us to do his will and good pleasure.

[12 : 50] Can you look back, perhaps beyond 2019 to earlier years and see what once you were and have you known times when your reaction to some event or something has surprised you, pleasantly surprised you?

Perhaps it was a circumstance where normally you would have lost your temper, flown into a rage, but you didn't and you were calm and you were patient. Do you see that that is the Holy Spirit changing you?

Don't get complacent, but give thanks for the Holy Spirit working in your heart. But of course, this can't begin until you come to Christ in faith.

the Apostle Paul, Saul of Tarsus, was someone who persecuted the church.

But Christ changed him. He changed Saul, the persecutor, the aggressor, into a gentle yet strong Apostle Paul.

[14 : 24] he can make the same kind of changes in your life too. But a lot depends on what we see.

How do you look at yourself? Do you see yourself as a son, a daughter of God? As somebody who was a nobody but now belongs to God?

who was no nation but now of the royal nation? Who are now of the priesthood of God?

Do you see yourself lifted up out of the mire, out of the gutter by grace and that you belong to him? in Philippians 2.13 then God says something that ought to influence how we see ourselves. And let me quote that verse to you from the New Living Translation to give a slightly different way of seeing it.

[15 : 44] For God is working in you giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. Do you see that in your life?

Paul is saying that we are a part of God's investment. We're a bundle of unlimited opportunity and potential and God wants to change us and then through us he wants to bring influence and change the world.

So don't go around saying well that's just the way I am. Ask him to change you. He can do that. And when the Holy Spirit has his way in your life you will be a new person. someone said life can be hard if lived by the yard but it's a cinch by the inch.

So place your life in God's hand and live it one inch at a time. Some years ago there were two young brothers who decided one day to pour paraffin into the stove in their school classroom because it was so cold and they wanted to warm things up.

[17 : 14] Unfortunately they poured what they thought was paraffin on the fire but it was petrol and the stove exploded. One of the boys was killed and it left the other one with badly burned legs.

Doctors told his parents that they must amputate his legs right away or his whole body would become infected. The parents said let's wait a day.

The next day the doctor said his legs must be amputated. The parents said no let's wait another day. This went on for several weeks until finally the doctors discovered that the legs were healing but that it left one leg shorter than the other and the doctors said he will keep his legs but he'll never be able to walk.

Within a few weeks the boy was standing up and hobbling around on crutches. The doctors changed their prediction. Well he may be able to walk but he'll never be able to walk without crutches.

But within a few more weeks he was walking without crutches. So they said well he may be able to walk without crutches but he'll never be able to run. But then he broke into a wobbly jog and soon he was running.

[18 : 44] That boy was Glenn Cunningham who in the 1930s won gold medals and set world records in track events. In his day he was called the fastest human being on two feet.

little by little inch by inch. With God we all have potential to be different.

God can even take crippled bodies and shattered lives and with them change the world. How does it look to you about yourself?

And then secondly how does the world look to you? The Bible teaches us that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him might have everlasting life.

God loves the world and sees each of us as a channel. Channels through whom his message of love might travel.

[19 : 58] as the church we were commissioned to go into all the world and preach the gospel. So what do you feel when you look at the world?

Are you concerned for the world? The people around you? Your neighbors who are in a mess? Do you just tut and dismiss them?

Or do you have compassion upon them? Or do you, like the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, simply walk by on the other side of the road?

If you don't tell people of Jesus, who else will do it? We have been entrusted with the gospel as the church and that's us together.

And it's not to keep it all to ourselves, but to share it. that the world may hear and know that there is help, that there is salvation, that there is forgiveness and pardon.

[21 : 38] Are you telling the world? And by the world, I don't mean going off to some steamy jungle somewhere, but the world on your doorstep, with those you work with, with those you have recreation with, those you relate to from day to day in the stores, as the neighbors, as you're gardening, or they're gardening, or they're tinkering with their car, or whatever it is, these are the ones, the world with whom we are to share the gospel, as we get to know them, as we befriend them, as we have opportunity to share the love of God, and to show that he cares by our care.

And then, thirdly, how does the church look to you? Oh, so sadly, it looks like a pile of rubble. It's not what it was. We can recall having read, at least, of better days, when the Spirit of God was abroad in the church, and the church was more glorious than she is now.

But be strong. Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Joshua. Be strong, all you people.

And here's the reason for being strong. The Lord of hosts says, I am with you. He says, I've made a covenant with you.

[23 : 40] My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear. He promises to the people that he's going to shake the heavens and the earth.

He's going to shake the sea and the dry land. He's going to shake the nations. Do you remember the description that was given of the early church in Acts?

As those that turn the world upside down, that's what we need to be doing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

we're not revolutionaries. We're not those who cause trouble and are forever going on strike. But we are to transform the world, doing things that the world doesn't expect.

It doesn't behave that way, but we as Christians do. and they sit up and take notice because we're turning the world, the order of things upside down, just as the early church did.

[25 : 12] So then what do you see about the church? Just a building? no.

It's the people who are the church, the people of God. We are the church. And we are the people with the potential to make a difference to the world for the glory of God.

2020 is unfolding before us. What are we going to make of it? Are we there to do the will and to work for God's good pleasure?

God at work in us and through us? Will he be that the pile of rubble that's the church, that's the world, that's even ourselves will be made glorious through the gospel?

He transformed the apostle Paul. He can transform you and I and do amazing things for his glory. May he grant to us all that we will make a change through 2020 as we seek to live for God and in his strength.

[27 : 08] Let us pray. All right.