

An Ordinary Fixation

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] Friends, let me just add some other things to what I said before. It's lovely to see so many familiar faces. I know there are others that would like to come and can't for one reason or another.

But it is like coming home for both of us. So we loved our five years here. And most of all, the thing that we loved the most was sharing God's word with you and you appreciating it.

So that's such a great blessing. We have often thought of you with great fondness in the past five years. So for those of you who know us and were part of the ministry here, thank you so much for this invitation.

And I want to start a little exploration of the book of Haggai with a word that you have heard before. I like it as a word because it's a way to tap into some key things of a relatively short Old Testament book.

Now, what's the word? The word is fixation. What do you think fixation means? Well, my dictionary tells me it's a word that has multiple meanings. It can mean to make something fixed or stable or stationary.

[1 : 05] Or it can mean to focus your attention on some object. Or it can be used to refer to something that commands a person's intimate attention exclusively, perhaps even repeatedly.

Something that they are fixated with. In psychology, a fixation is when someone attaches themselves to, say, a person or an object in a particular way.

It might be a simple, immature attachment. Or it could be a less healthy neurotic attachment. Or it might even be a pathological attachment. But today, I want to use it in a non-psychological way.

I want to talk about the act of focusing attention on something. Your eyes. That is not your eyes, but your eyes focusing on something.

Or focusing your psyche on something. But let me give you an example of fixation that we could kick off with. It's a personal example. Let me explain. You see, when I started preparing this series of sermons on Haggai, I became fixated.

[2 : 06] A fixation developed where I would focus my attention on how I could weave the word fix into as many of the sermons as possible. And you'll be able to hear these as we, the fruit of my little flights of fancy as we go on.

For example, and I thought I'd weave the titles of most of these talks would be weaved with the word fixation. So, by way of an example, the title of this talk is An Ordinary Fixation.

The title of the second talk is A Presence Fixed. The title of the third talk is A King Affixed.

Friends, it's very easy to become fixated. Perhaps some of you are inclined that way, like me. At the moment, our country is fixated, isn't it? On a pandemic.

I have friends and relatives that are fixated with computer games. Others are fixated with gardening. I can't understand that one myself. Or golf.

[3 : 17] Or footy. Or another person. You name it, you can possibly become fixated with it. Or fixated on it. It might be the ordinary. It might be the harmful.

It might be the amazingly beneficial. And even Jesus notices that we, as people, as humans, can become fixated. In fact, he tells a great story about people fixated in Matthew 24, 37 to 38.

Now, I'm not going to read the story, but you will recognize it as you go. If you have Bibles that you can get to easily, then open it up. So it's Matthew 24, 37 to 38. And Jesus' focus is on a parallel between the days of the coming of the Son of Man and the days before the flood, back in Noah's time.

In the days of the flood, he said, people were concerned with the ordinary tasks of life. Things like eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. They were focused on, attached to the ordinary.

So overwhelming was that fixation that they knew nothing of their impending doom until it landed on them. They were unaware of the flood until it arrived.

[4 : 29] And they were swept away with it. They were so fixated on the ordinary that they knew nothing until that flood came and swept them away. Then Jesus goes on to explain how a similar fixation with the ordinary will accompany the coming of the day of the Son of Man.

And do you know what? I think that the people of Haggai's day were similarly fixated on the ordinary. The everyday. And into the midst of their ordinary lives, God interrupted them. He sent his prophet Haggai. He spoke his word through Haggai. He questioned their fixation. And I think that as Haggai does with this people in his own day, God is using him to question us as well. You see, I think God is speaking to us this evening through the prophet Haggai and has some words for us about our ordinary fixations. So with that big picture and bit of background, let's see what God has to say to us through this great but neglected prophet.

Turn with me to the book of Haggai and let's listen to God speak his words into the worlds of these ancient people. Let's hear him speak to us in our world as well.

[5 : 54] With this in mind, let's pray again. And let's ask God to be at work among us as we focus on this marvelous little book. From him through his prophet.

Let's pray. Father God, we pray for ourselves today. Please do see our desperate need to hear from you. Please break into our little ordinary worlds that we tend to create for ourselves.

Please speak to us from your word. Please be at work in us by your spirit. Please fashion our hearts, our wills and our fixations that they might match yours.

And we pray this for the glory of your son. Amen. Let's get underway again. Have your Bibles open just as I said. And when you do, I want you to notice that verse 1 tells us that the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai in the second year of King Darius.

Now, we can place that fairly accurately. That would be about 520 BC. And this was an extraordinary time in the history of God's people. Over 700 years had passed since God had rescued his people from Egypt and entered into a covenant with them.

[7 : 11] That's a fair time. And their existence ever since had been characterized by one unchanging disposition among the people of God. They were people of rebellion and sin.

They broke the covenant between God and them. And God forgave them time after time after time. But eventually he punished them with a devastating judgment.

He sent foreign armies into the promised land. Their cities were leveled to the ground. Their kings were killed or imprisoned. The temple in Jerusalem was desecrated and destroyed.

Ordinary Israelites were killed or carted off into exile in significant numbers. And then God acted again. He spoke again through his prophets to his people.

And this time he promised return from exile. Forgiveness. And enormous comfort. This time he promised great and glorious things.

[8 : 12] And through Isaiah God spoke of a pagan king called Cyrus. Who would send them home. And he gave them visions of a grand future for the people of God.

He talked about a new era that would dawn. And in those days God's people would re-inhabit the land that God had given to them. The temple would be rebuilt. God's blessings would be enjoyed in God's land.

Prophets such as Jeremiah spoke of new covenants. Ezekiel spoke of a new heart and a new spirit within the people of God. He also had visions of a rebuilt temple. God returning to it and the presence of a Davidic king.

The expectations were huge. It's hard for us to imagine how huge they were. To turn the rubble into something. But you can see it in verses 6 to 9 of Haggai chapter 2.

God's people looked for much. They anticipated that these coming days would be extraordinary days. So there's the background. The big picture of the context of this book.

[9 : 18] Now let's take a close look at Haggai starting with the first 11 verses. And I want you to notice a few things. First, we are told that it is the second year of King Darius.

By this time much of what God had promised through the prophets had already happened. Just as promised. His people had returned after the decree of Cyrus in 539 BC. Ezra had initiated and guided the rebuilding of the temple.

However, it hadn't been without problems. Early efforts at rebuilding were frustrated by local resistance and opposition. You can see that being described in Ezra chapter 4 verses 4 to 5.

But look at our passage for tonight. Look at chapter 1 verse 9. God says, They had looked for much. But when they brought it home, He blew it away.

The heavens withdrew dew. The earth withdrew, withheld produce. Droughts came and spoiled the crops. God's people had great expectations.

[10:23] They had heard the prophetic announcements. They expected much. But reality looked so different. And so, their excitement, their anticipation, waned.

They became disappointed. Apathy and lethargy crept in. And the way this showed itself is clear in verse 2. Can you see it there? God tells us that His people began to say that these days were not the days to rebuild.

They said, No, no, not now. Apparently, they considered now was not the time. And so, they began to get on with just ordinary life. As we humans are prone to do when we're not getting what we want.

Presumably, just as in the days of Noah, they got on with eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. Verse 4 tells us that they built houses for themselves. Verse 6 says, They ate, they drank, they clothed themselves, they worked.

Theirs was an ordinary fixation. They just got attached to living, surviving, fixed on ordinary things. So, there's the context. But I want you to look at the context just a little more closely.

[11:35] Look at verse 2. It tells us that God's people speak about time. They are saying that the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

They're not saying let's not rebuild it at all. But it's not time now. But God says their understanding of time is wrong. Look at verse 4. He speaks of time as well.

And he says, Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in panelled houses while this house lies in ruins? God's clear. Things are not as they should be.

That's what verses 4 and 5 are about. The slackness has had an impact. The covenant blessings expected have not been felt. There was no blessing in the city, no blessing in the country, no increase, no rich storehouses, no blessing in all their undertakings, none of the things that they'd expected.

In fact, the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28 have been encountered. Look at verses 10 and 11. The heavens have withheld dew. Earth has withheld produce.

[12:45] God himself has called for drought on the land and the hills, the grain, the new wine and the oil. He has withdrawn the goodness from humans and animals and all their labours.

But why? What is it that Israel could possibly have got wrong? Well, look, take another look. Verses 4 and 10. They appear to supply an answer to this question.

Verse 4 says that God's house lies in ruins. The contrast between the people's panelled houses and God's house probably means that they have finished off their own houses, but not finished God's house.

They have not given it the attention that it needs. It has not been a right focus. Therefore, God has not been a right focus for them. But look at 9 to 10 as well. It makes clear that the focus has been on their ordinary interests and not on divine and covenant interests.

And so the heavens, which God oversees had withheld dew and produce. Friends, I wonder if you can hear what God's saying here.

[13:50] The presenting issue is God's temple, God's house. People are failing to give it the attention they should. They're telling God now, now, it's not the time now.

And God objects to that. But what is this all about? Why is God so concerned with temples and buildings? What's going on?

Well, to really understand this passage today, and this book, you need to think more broadly. You need to understand what the temple is about. What was it?

Was it just a building? Or was it something else? Let me just sketch a bigger picture for you. First, we need to understand the place of the tabernacle and the temple in the life of God's people.

In the Old Testament, tabernacle, temple, are signs of God's presence among his people. They pointed forward to God's purposes in his world. They pointed beyond the people to the world.

[14:51] And his purpose was to dwell among his people, and that they and he would live together in untainted fellowship. And when God's people here leave, in Haggai, leave the temple, when they become fixated on their ordinary pursuits, when they refuse to build God's house, they show what?

They show they are not interested in God's purposes in his world. They are not interested in God's pursuits. They are saying to God, we're really not even interested in you.

We don't want your presence. We don't want to be your people. We want something else and someone else. In other words, their priorities are not on God and or his desires.

They're focused on their desires. Their priorities are not his priorities. They are their priorities. Sisters and brothers in Christ, I wonder if you'd now turn with me to the words of our Lord in Matthew 6.

So in your Bibles, flip over to Matthew 6 and turn to verse 19 there. I'll read it in the following verses for us.

[16:08] Jesus says, do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, for where your heart will be also. The eye of the lamp is the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.

But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. And if then the light within you is darkness, how great will be that darkness?

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Therefore, I tell you, don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food?

[17:18] And the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor store away in barns. And yet their heavenly father feeds them.

Are you much not more valuable than them? Are you not much more valuable than them? Can any of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow? They don't labor or spin, and yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

And if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow, is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith?

Will he not much more clothe you of little faith? So don't worry saying, what shall we eat? Or what shall we drink? Or what shall we wear? For the pagans run after such things, and your heavenly father knows that you need them.

[18:23] But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you. Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself.

Each day has enough trouble of its own. I wonder if you can hear what Jesus is saying. He's saying something very similar to Haggai. He's saying something very faithful to scripture.

He's telling his people, the people that God has a purpose in his world. And that purpose is tied up with his kingdom. And we know from the New Testament, don't we, that this kingdom is tied up with God's king, that is God's son.

And Jesus is saying we should seek first that kingdom, and that righteousness. He's saying that God wants our fixation not to be ordinary, like that of the Gentiles and the pagans.

No. It is to be an extraordinary fixation. It's to be on God, and his purposes in his son. God knows that we need these other things.

[19:37] But the way to get them in perspective is to see them as secondary priorities. Again, can you hear what Jesus is saying? It's strong and potent. Can you feel its implications?

Let me explain. Jesus is making clear that a priority on God and his purpose will orient you rightly in life. It will drive you away from materialism and fixation on the ordinary.

Life will not consist of being consumed with eating, with drinking, with marrying and giving in marriage, like in the days of Noah and the days of Haggai, with all the other ordinary things that take up our time in this world.

No, it will be consumed with God. Our deepest wish, resolve, and preoccupation will be to live God's way.

It will be living under God's direction and control, oriented toward God's end, pursuing God's purpose. Such things will become first rather than the add-ons at the end of your other things to do.

[20:47] They will have priority, not the daily things. Let me close our session for tonight by addressing some words to two groups among you.

First of all, I want to address those of you who are sitting here saying, not now. Now is not the time to be focused on building God's house or the equivalent in our situation.

Now is not the time to be giving attention to seeking first the kingdom of God. Now is the time for eating and drinking, for marrying and giving in marriage or their equivalents. Now is the time for ordinary fixations in life.

If that's you, I want you to hear the warnings of God in Haggai today. I want you to hear the warnings of Jesus about the days of Noah. And I want to urge you, please, to reconsider. You see, blessing is found in lining yourself up with God and His extraordinary fixation. And curse is found in lining yourself up with ordinary fixations.

[21 : 57] Please reconsider. Please work out what lining up with God and His kingdom means in your context. Please, please, do as our Lord says, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

He will add everything else. But maybe that's not you here tonight. Now, I want to speak to a second group here tonight. You have been committed to Christian ministry.

You've been Christians over many years. But we still live, don't we, in a world of careers and houses and possessions. And my experience of the observation of myself and others is that Christians can sometimes be amongst the most careerist people on earth.

Or they're fixated with the ordinary rather than the extraordinary. Sometimes we even clothe it with gospel and kingdom language. Have you noticed that? But in our hearts, our goals can be very, very ordinary.

We discovered this threat coming back from Singapore. We could just revert to something quieter, whatever, and catch up with things we'd missed out on and so on and so forth.

[23 : 19] Can you see that? Our hearts can be very ordinary and it sneaks up on us. Friends, if that's so, please take heed of this passage.

This is not just a message for an ancient people with ordinary interests. You might have thought that some temple way back, some long time ago, might have no impact on you.

No, think again. This is God's word for us as well. And so can I urge you tonight the way our Lord did, to seek first the kingdom of God which finds its center in Him.

Seek first His righteousness. Spend time on your knees. Ask God to purify your hearts and fill them with Christ.

Center our lives and ministry on Him and His glory alone. Avoid the ordinary fixations of ordinary humans. For we are children of the kingdom of God if we are Christian.

[24 : 31] And let that fixation which is God's fixation be ours. Let it be our central and prior orientation to all the other calls that come to us.

In the words of Matthew 6 verse 33 seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for giving us this word today. thank you for this ancient book speaking about an old problem just with a different context.

We thank you for the reminder of Jesus. Father, please so orient our hearts that we might seek first your kingdom and your righteousness.

And thank you that you look after the other things. We thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 41] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.