

A Presence Fixed

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[0 : 00] Friends, it's great to be with you again. Coming back here is like coming home in many ways, and so we're glad of that. Heather's not able to be with us tonight, but she loved her time here last week, and so thank you for making us feel at home again.

Well, let's pray and ask God to help us. Our Father, we pray. Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have said that your word is living and active, that it's sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit of joints and marrow.

You have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So please enable me to speak from your word faithfully today, and please cause it to do what you have promised, and we pray this in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Well, it was a pivotal moment. The people of God had been rescued from slavery in Egypt by a series of spectacular signs and wonders.

They had marched through the Red Sea as though it were on dry land. The sea had swallowed up all of Pharaoh's armies, and now they were at Mount Sinai. God had met with them.

[1 : 19] He had entered into covenant with them. They had pledged obedience to him. This is from Exodus chapter 24. The elders, they had gone halfway, partway up onto the mountain and actually seen God.

And then the glory of the Lord settled on the mountain, and it looked as though the whole mountaintop was being consumed with a consuming fire. God beckoned Moses to come up, and he did.

But then he stayed there 40 days and 40 nights. The people became fidgety down the bottom part of the mountain, and they thought, perhaps something's happened to this man.

Without him, they had no connection with God. So they asked Aaron to make them gods, and they crafted a golden calf. Aaron tells the people that this is the God who brought them up out of Egypt. An altar is built. Celebration ensues. Meanwhile, up on the mountain, God tells Moses what's going on further down the mountain. He tells Moses his inclination is just to wipe the lot of them out.

[2 : 21] In his anger, then push ahead with Moses. It's a terrifying prospect. Moses is horrified. So he intercedes, and he begs God to turn away his anger.

He says, remember the covenant you made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God hears him. He relents from wiping out his people. But he does also threaten that he'll not go with them.

But then he even relents of that. We read this in the closing chapters of Exodus. Moses has finished his work of constructing the tabernacle, and God acts in surprising grace.

For the cloud of his presence then comes down and covers the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle. And God's timely presence does go with them.

Friends, this is the God who loves to dwell among his people. We see him expressing that tangibly again in Solomon's time.

[3 : 27] Do you remember? Solomon, when he builds the temple, takes the Ark of the Covenant, he installs it in that new temple, and God responds tangibly, visibly. Cloud fills the house of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord fills the house of the Lord.

And Solomon says, That is the temple that Ezekiel says that the Lord had vacated because of sin, in Ezekiel chapter 10.

This is the temple that was decimated by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. At the same time, because of this, in God's people had been cast off into exile by the Lord who was considered to dwell in the temple.

It is that same Lord who addresses his returned people in Haggai chapter 1. They're incredible verses. Haggai's an incredible book.

Difficult to understand, I think, but incredible. Do you remember what happened in the first 11 verses we looked at last week? The Lord sent his prophet Haggai. Haggai addressed Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest.

[4 : 38] Israel is in dire straits at this particular moment of time. Inflation is booming. As verse 6 seems to indicate, that is happening. Work is put in, but rewards are few for the people.

They eat, but they don't have enough. They drink, but they never have their fill. They clothe themselves, but it's not even enough to keep them warm. Those who earn wages only do so to put them in what appears to be holes in their equivalent of trousers.

So inflation. But there's more. There are poor harvests. If you look at verse 9 in our passage, the prophet tells them that they looked for much, but when they brought it home, the Lord just blew it away.

Blew it away. Now look at verse 11. It tells us that the Lord also called for drought on top of all of that. A drought on the land and on the hills.

On the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast and on all of their labors. Then the Lord makes known the cause of the devastation.

[5 : 50] In verse 9, he says that if they ask the critical why question, why? Why, Lord? Why is this happening? Then the answer is clear from him.

It is his work. He has called it to happen. I think what God is effectively doing in these verses, he's declaring that these things are happening because God's people are not seeking his glory and his glory alone.

They are making their own homes beautiful. And they were doing this while God's house was in a state of disrepair and incompleteness.

They hadn't finished the job that they had undertaken to do. They had not put the Lord at the forefront of their attention. They had become concerned solely with themselves. And that was said in our passage from last week.

Back in chapter 1, we heard that twice, he urged them to take a good hard look and to consider their ways. Verses 5 and 7 in chapter 1. And the message is clear.

[6 : 50] God is to be put first in their lives. And that will be demonstrated and reflected in them rebuilding his house. That will show that he really is in the center of their existence.

Haggai is doing his traditional prophetic task. He's identified the sin of the people. He's used words to indicate that the covenant had been broken and the Lord has enacted covenant curses upon his people.

Implicit in the agreement he made with them. So that brings us to verse 12. So follow with me. Look at the next stage here and see what happens. In verses 12 to 15 we're told they make an appropriate covenant response.

The king, that is Zerubbabel, the high priest, Joshua, and all the remnant of the people obey God's prophetic word. They fear the Lord. In effect, I think they repent.

And God responds in verse 13. And he affirms the covenant in the clearest way with the clear word through Haggai the prophet. Look at verse 13 in front of you. Haggai announces the word of God to the people.

[7 : 51] He says, I am with you. Those words in the Bible are profound. God is saying any gap between us has been dissipated.

Then just as the Lord stirred up and gifted the people in relation to the tabernacle, so he does here. Look at verse 14. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel and Joshua and all the remnant of the people and they came.

And they worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, and it was the 24th day of the month in the second year of Darius the king. So, sisters and brothers in Christ, what do we do with all of this?

I mean, this is fairly unfamiliar territory for us, isn't it? It's a bit foreign to us. We don't really understand this world of temples and so on very well. So what is actually going on?

What's this all about? Let's see if we can clear some ground for us so that we understand. Let's look on the surface and then we'll look under the surface. On the surface, what do we see here in these verses?

[8 : 50] Well, it's clearly about covenant, isn't it? God is reminding his people, look, you are, we are in covenant with each other and covenants, well, they have obligations often on both sides and the

right response of you, the people of God, he's saying, is to respond to the Lord with covenant obedience and covenant renewal.

So that's clear and that would be clearly known by God's people even if they neglected these things. They knew that this was the arrangement but if we dig under the surface of what is going on here, there's much more to see and the first thing to see and hear is God's initiative.

He calls his prophet, he gives his prophet his word and he pushes his prophet to remind his people that he does have a purpose for them and so this passage, I think, is full of divine initiative but it's also full of divine presence.

That is what God says to his people in verse 3, through his temple, though his temple is not yet rebuilt, he is already with them. Even in their rebellion, he is already with them.

He is with his people through his prophetic word. He's with his people through his activity and stirring up the spirit of the people. He's working with and through his people. He is enabling them.

[10:07] He is with them. That brings us to chapter 2, verses 1 to 9. Let's look at what happens here. In verse 1, can you see it there?

God takes the initiative again. In the seventh month, on the 21st day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. In other words, God sends his prophet and he gives his prophet a word.

He tells him to speak to their leader, Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, to the religious representatives, Joshua the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people. In other words, to everyone.

And he poses a question. Effectively, he asks them what they think of his temple. I think that's what's going on. Well, how does it look? What do they reckon?

Doesn't it look like a little bit pitiful beside the old one? In other words, and it's nothing really compared to the glory of Solomon's temple, is it?

[11:09] No, it's nothing like that. This is just a tiny little tent, as it were. Nothing compared to the former glory. In other words, God knows the thoughts and attitudes of his people.

He knows what they're thinking. He knows that they are right. The temple is nothing like that which preceded it. As verse 3 says, if you put Solomon's temple alongside this temple, it's nothing, this temple.

And those who saw Solomon's glorious building know that. In other words, the prophet is speaking plainly to the people, not hiding anything. But then he moves to encouragement. Can you see it there?

Look at it. Verse 4 here in this chapter. Be strong now, Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest.

Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts. That's the Lord of armies. So now we've seen God's divine initiative.

[12:12] We've heard God's divine question. We've listened to the divine exhortation to his people. Now, comes a divine assurance, the divine presence.

Have a look at it. Look at the second half of verse 4 and also verse 5 together. Just as in our previous chapter, God promises his presence. And look, yet now be strong, he says, O Zerubbabel. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehoshadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord, for work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts.

According to the covenant I made with you when you came out of Egypt, my spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. It's hard for me to convey the encouragement this would have been.

What God is actually saying, he's saying, I am with you. Everything you ever want is here. Sisters and brothers in Christ, can you hear that? In Exodus, they saw God rest with them in rescue.

[13:17] In the golden calf incident that I told you, it looked as though God would no longer go with them. But then he relented, he turned back from sending judgment. He did go with them and he did fill the tabernacle with his presence.

As verses 4 and 5 made clear, he's still their covenant God. He is still with them. He's still the one who made promises when they came out of Egypt. His spirit still remains in their midst, even in this exilic place.

So they need not fear. God is for them and with them. Now I want you to look at the last three verses or four verses, six to nine. Now in order to understand these verses, and Haggai is difficult, so we need to stay with it.

We need to be aware that God's people probably expected the temple would be like that which Ezekiel prophesied. It goes on many, many chapters. If you read the book of Ezekiel, if you've ever been wading through your whole of the Bible and you've got to Ezekiel that part where the temple comes, it's a bit where I think modern readers sort of think, ah yeah, they're most tempted to flip pages.

They thought it would be huge and grand, but God tells them it's not. In verses six to nine, he looks forward into history to come and the language speaks of future times and he directs them that way. [14:38] Look at verse six. The Lord promises a future where he will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land and even the nations. Even more than in Solomon's day, the nations will stream with treasure to this place.

Verse seven, God will fill this place with splendor. The latter splendor will surpass the former splendor. His place, his land, his temple will be a place of prosperity and peace. Thus declares the Lord of hosts. So, friends, let's think again about what this is about. Again, if we just stay on the surface of the text, we can see great things.

This passage and the preceding one are rich with God's presence. This passage and the preceding one are full of his initiative. He is present by his spirit, present in his enabling, present in his word, present in his promise, present with his prophet amongst his people.

And as he says himself, he is with them. But if we begin to explore a bit further, there are questions. For example, did you notice something that is strikingly absent?

[15:53] I want you to think about all those other experiences of the temple. What does not happen here? What does not happen here? Previously, when God's temple and God's presence are linked, there has been a tangible and visible sign.

God gives a visible symbol to assure his people it's all okay, he's there. What was it? Do you remember? If you did, you'd know that the climax of such encounters was that the Lord filled the house with the cloud of his presence.

Do you remember that? We saw it in Exodus 40 with Moses. We see it in 1 Kings 8 with Solomon, but not here. God says he's present, but there's no tangible physical sign such as a cloud.

And you will not find references to it in other post-exilic or return writers. No, it's not there because it was not, it did not happen. It's not there in Ezra and Nehemiah. What does that mean? Why no cloud?

Why no assurance of his presence? Well, it can't be the people's disobedience. After all, chapter 1 showed them to be a model of covenant obedience once their sin was demonstrated.

[17:04] They obeyed, they feared the Lord, they responded rightly and God responded by stirring them up. So why no cloud? Well, I think that Haggai indicated why there is, I think he's indicated why there is no cloud.

And I think it's clear from chapter 1 and chapter 2 that the temple is important for him. But in the last few verses of our passage, he's saying to us that while it's important, God is looking beyond this temple.

God is looking beyond this temple to some future, grander temple. God's aiming for something better than this one they see in exile.

And let me tell you, it wasn't Herod's temple. Herod's temple was very grand, but it's not what God was after. Jesus tells us more.

So in your Bibles, I want you to flip through to John chapter 2. And you'll recognize these verses. Flip through to John chapter 2. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem in verse 13 of this chapter.

[18:10] And do you remember? He drives some of the, out of the temple those selling things and money changers. He demonstrates his zeal for the temple in verse 17. He indicates that the temple to come was him.

And do you remember what he said? He said to the Jews of his day, destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.

And God makes, and John makes clear that the temple he was talking about was his own body.

And in John chapter 1 verse 14 it's made explicit. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory. That's what the cloud was. The glory of God. We have seen his glory. What glory? Glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth.

And then in verse 19 John confirms it. Jesus says, when the Jews ask him for a sign he says to them, no one has ever seen God.

[19 : 23] The only God who is at the father's side he has made him known. And Matthew further endorses this when he recalls that his name is, do you remember? Emmanuel. God with us.

You see, Jesus is the one who fulfills this hope, this longing, this purpose. And that's why the absence of the cloud causes us to push forward and say, this must happen somewhere, somehow. And when Jesus walks on earth it does. It does. To him the nations will stream. To him the nations will stream for eternity or till this world ends.

Eternal prosperity will rest in his hands. And so when we read the book of Revelation who is it? Who is it? That's at the centre of the garden city in the closing chapters of Revelation.

Is it a lamb? Yes and no. It is one who surpasses Solomon. It is Jesus the son of God.

[20 : 30] But friends there's even more that flows from this. I want you to in your Bibles turn to Acts chapter 1. You'll all remember the context of Acts chapter 1.

The disciples come to Jesus after his resurrection and they ask him about the coming of his kingdom in verses 6 to 8 of chapter 1. And he makes clear that they're asking the wrong question. They're asking about timing. They should be asking about their task in this post-crucifixion post-resurrection world. That's what's most concerning him. And their task is to preach the gospel. To fulfil that task what will they need? Well they'll need the spirit. So they should stop staring up into heaven and they should wait for the spirit to come. And then by implication they should get on with the task.

That's the context of Acts 2. And it's there that we hear of tongues of fire. Just like Mount Sinai. And God gives his spirit.

[21 : 33] And through his spirit he indwells his people. Jesus is the new temple. But so are the people of God. They are those indwelt by the spirit now.

They are the ones in whom God dwells. As Paul says in Ephesians 2 listen to this verse 22. They are those who are growing into a holy temple in the Lord in whom they are being built together in the spirit to a dwelling place of God.

We if you're a Christian you we are the temple of God now. We see we are those who mediate Christ to the world through the preaching of the gospel.

This is another fulfilment of Haggai chapter 2. The spirit is here amongst us today forming and energising God's living temple which is his people. Fellow believers if that's true then I wonder if you can see the implications.

Can you see where this is going? Luke is indicating that we are part of the end time temple. Hard to believe isn't it? Which Haggai looked forward to.

[22 : 44] And as we bring the news of the fulfilment of the temple in Jesus we're engaged in further building and expansion of that temple. Not a physical building a spiritual one that's what Paul said and if that's true I wonder if we could just sneak back to Haggai just a little bit more before we finish up.

Can you see the spiritual equivalent of building the temple? It is the spirit filled proclamation of the people of God that God has done it. He's fulfilled his promise.

He's fulfilled it in his son Jesus the Christ. In him he has given peace. In him he is present in his world. He is God's future the way to access God.

So with that in mind let me speak to those of you who call yourself Christians. Sisters, brothers in Christ will you build God's house? will you build God's house?

How do you do it? Will you obey his call to testify to him? In Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the earth will you call people to enter a relationship with God through his son?

[24 : 03] That is where God's future is headed where all will be tied together with God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit together.

That's where God is headed for. Let's pray. Father, so much of the time we are like these ancient Jews.

We get tied, fixated with the physical. And Father, yet the eternal is a presence with you.

and Father, we pray that in whatever way we can, as we call ourselves Christians, we will build your house. Build your house by declaring your son, by testifying to him throughout the world.

Father, please help us in whatever way we can to call people to enter relationship with God, to enter his house as it were. For this is where eternity is headed. And Father, we thank you for this, and we pray that you'll help us in this, in Jesus' name.

[25 : 19] Amen. The whole, why does he talk about silver and gold?

Yeah, okay, let me just have a look. Hang on a moment. So which verses again? Chapter 67, about the shaping of the heavens and the earth.

Yeah, okay. Yes, I, my own view about this is that I think he's still looking, it's, one of the hard things about Israelite prophecy is that it has multiple references.

Does that make sense? so my best example is if you're bushwalking and you're getting sick of all the hills you have to cross, you look ahead and you spot a pinnacle and you climb towards that only to find that there's another one behind it.

You've had that experience, I guess, and then you've tried again and you keep going and you keep having, that is, you present something that is true, but you find it is true repeatedly.

[26 : 49] And I don't know, but I guess that this is happening and so in a little while I will shake the heavens more, I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, shake all the nations and what is desired by all the nations will come and I'll fill this house says the Lord, the silver is mine and so on and so I'm wondering whether he's peering forth into history of which there will be multiple dots on the, as you go forward, but one climactic one and perhaps that climactic one is the Lord's coming himself, that is now could be his coming in the incarnation or it could be his coming at the end of time.

So it's very tricky. I think these are the, you have spotted what I think are probably the hardest verses in the whole lot. Yeah, but that's my way of thinking about it if I was to have, if I was to declare myself.

Thanks, Mark. Oh, yeah. I'm not sure.

Basically, I'm not sure unless it is the wealth of this, I'll shake all nations by and what is desired by all the nations will come. I'll fill the house with glory. And yeah, I'm really a bit, I'm sorry.

Andrew, could it be that in the comparison between Solomon's temple, when that was built, a refrain in 1 Kings is that everything was overlaid with gold and treasure. And the idea here is this present house will be greater.

[28 : 28] So don't worry about it looking small. I've got all the gold, I've got all the silver to make it glorious. It could be that. That is just he's saying exactly what you said, that is. It doesn't look like that now, but it will.

And it will be grander than anything you've seen before. Yeah, that's helpful. Thank you. Any questions? Just raise your hand. Like I said, this is the trickiest one of the lot.

I think it's why so many preachers don't address this book because it is so tricky. So I've tried to give you the big picture rather than look at the details, if that makes sense.

Next week is a bit easier. You'll be glad to know. I will be glad to know. Andrew, just at the end there, you touched on the way we build the temple today, through the proclamation of the gospel of the Son of God.

Could you say something about, just because we've got time, just your opinions on evangelism, some of the hurdles?