

Obeying the Voice

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[0 : 0 0] Our second reading is from Haggai, chapter 1, verses 1 through 15, and you can find this on page 831 in the Old Testament section of your few Bibles.

Haggai, chapter 1, verses 1 through 15. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest. Thus says the Lord of hosts, this people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider how you have fared. You have sown much and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough. You drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages, earns wages to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it, and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and lo, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why, says the Lord of hosts? Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves, each with his own house. Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land and the hills, upon the grain, the new wine, the oil, upon what the ground brings forth, upon men and cattle, and upon all their labors. Then Zerubbabel, the son of

Shealtiel, and Joshua, the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared before the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message. I am with you, says the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua, the son of Jehoshadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people. And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you because you speak to us in your word. And we thank you because you stir up our spirits as we hear your word. We pray, Father, that you will give us by your Holy Spirit, humble and open hearts, so that we will be open to what you have to say to us and willing to obey through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[3 : 15] Well, before I preach, I'd like to wish Dave and Bronn Short a very happy 25th anniversary on Wednesday. And according to, I think Dave said that Bronn was married at age 13, is that right? When you got married? So congratulations to them. We're going to be going through a new sermon series. And the clergy got together to talk about what the sermon series would be on. And having finished one of the longest sermon series in St. John's history, a year and a half long, with a sabbatical in the middle of it, we decided to take one of the shortest books of the Bible. And we wanted about a two-week series, so we took the only book that has two chapters in it. And it happens to be Haggai, which is here. And if you're married and you and your spouse differ on whether it's Haggai or Haggai, don't worry about it. You'll get over it. And it's not worth fighting over. The thing about Haggai that's great, too, is that it is a book that has a very straightforward message, something that you will be keeping track of over these two weeks. And be sure to come back next week as well, because you see these things applied in real-life sorts of situations that actually talk about the difficulties in life. You know, Haggai is the most precisely dated book in the Bible. That reading that we heard Martin read is from Haggai speaking on the August 29th, 520 B.C. And we know that for certainty because of the sources outside the Bible as well. And God would speak through

Haggai three more times over a period of four months. And that's the content of this book. And that day and the book of Haggai, the 29th, was a day of incredible importance because this is the first time since the Israelites came back from captivity in Babylon that God spoke to them directly through a prophet. And the message that God speaks is very simple. He says, rebuild the temple. That's His message to them. Rebuild the temple. And therefore, we need a bit of a short history lesson here because we need to know that the Israelites were deported to Babylon and had to stay there for 70 years. At the end of that 70 years, the king of Persia defeated Babylon. And that was 18 years before Haggai speaks. And Cyrus, who was the king, issued a decree that all the people who were captives could return to their homes. And he specifically singled out the Jews and said,

I want you to be able to rebuild your temple as well. Cyrus was sort of a postmodern guy. He wanted to cover his bases. And if he could be friends with all the gods around him, he figured he'd be okay in the future. And so he says, rebuild it. And it was a temple that was destroyed during the time that they were in exile, utterly destroyed. And so was the city of Jerusalem as well. And so we hear in the book of Ezra that about 42,000 Israelites left as a big group to go back to Israel, led by Zerubbabel, which is a great name. If you're pregnant right now, you can think about that name for your child.

It's not taken. I know that. And Joshua, who was the high priest of the time as well. And so they together lead this large group back. And very shortly after they return to Jerusalem, they start rebuilding the temple. But right from the start, things went wrong. The temple was something that was extremely important to the Israelites, because it was a symbol to the world that the living God was with his people, was truly in a relationship with them. This did not go over well with those around them in the area. And what they did was set out to discourage the Israelites from building.

And the way they did it was nothing new. They hired lawyers to work against them. And what they did, these lawyers, was to lodge accusations to the Persian king against the Israelites. And the result was a temporary work stoppage by the king. And the Jews were afraid to pursue the matter legally, and the work on the temple came to a standstill for another 12 years. And that brings us to the 29th of August, 520 BC. And Haggai begins to speak God's words on page 831. And if you look at verse 2, this is what he says.

[8 : 18] He says to them, he actually starts by revealing to the Israelites what the conventional wisdom is. Thus says the Lord of hosts, and by the way, that word, Lord of hosts, he's saying, thus says the one who is far greater than the king of Persia. This people says, the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. Well, now we know God was not pleased with this thinking, because instead of saying, my people, he says, this people. It's like if you have children at home, and your spouse says when you get home, your son did this. You know it's not going to be complimentary. It's not going to be a good thing. Something to be proud of. But if they say, my son, or our son did this, you know it's something to be proud of. It's something good.

And that's the sense that God is saying here. Here is a people who have let God down. God searches the hearts of his people, and he speaks directly words to them that tells them what is wrong. And he says this in verse 4, is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins. Now the paneled houses of 520 BC were not like the paneled basements of 1970. This means that there is woodwork that is intricate and inlaid, and there's carving that takes time and care and attention to make it really top-notch housing.

So they looked really good. And God is saying, where is the time and attention on my priorities? Is it time to seek your comfort and well-being, and at the same time neglect the work of God?

That is a very searching verse. It's one that actually goes to the hearts of those who are listening. Hebrews 4.12 tells us what's going on in this verse. The word of God is living and active. It discerns the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. That's what God is doing here.

Those listening to Haggai's question knew in their hearts that there were lots of things in their life more important than God's honor and his glory. Their intentions were very simply to be safe and to be comfortable and not to take risks for the things of God. After all, they'd had a rough go of it for a decade, then recently they'd been very fearful about these lawyers. So why not establish themselves, get on a solid footing, and then maybe they could look beyond themselves once things were going smoothly.

[11 : 08] But God is revealing here that he had been neglected and relegated to second place in their lives. So he's saying that there's a serious spiritual problem here, and the only way to deal with it is by listening and obeying God's word. Now there's two things to obey. There's two basic things that God says must be done in order to address the problem. The first thing that they had to do was evaluate themselves, but look at themselves from God's perspective. And this must be critically important because look at verses five and seven. In both of them they say, consider how you have fared. That's not a mistake that he's repeating himself. He's emphasizing. And the translation lets us down a bit here because literally in the original, the words mean, set to heart your ways. In other words, bring to your heart why you're doing what you're doing. What is your motivation? What are you about in your life?

So a better translation is, consider your ways, as some translation says. And I think this is a searching question for each of us today. It's very easy to get caught up in a life that pushes God to the sidelines. Our human nature is very susceptible to a spiritual drift that we might not even notice, which is the frightening part of this. After all, look at what happened to the people in Jerusalem.

Surely they didn't intend to drift away spiritually. But look at their life in verse six. When they returned to Jerusalem, they were completely filled with investing in a lot of agriculture, in eating, in drinking, in buying clothes, and in earning a paycheck. That's what life was about.

And yet there was not much return. What they were striving for seemed to slip through their fingers. The happiness and the security, the fulfillment, was literally slipping through their fingers.

Well, thankfully, what God did was to grab their attention. Look at verse nine. He's very clear here, what's going on. He says in verse nine at the end, my house lies in ruins while you busy yourselves each with his own house.

[13 : 41] There's the crux of the problem. This is what spiritual drift ends up in. And so that's why God has to use a drought in verses 10 and 11 to get their attention and to remind them that everything comes from God, to turn their attention to him and to know that from him comes their ability to earn, the soil to plant their crops in, the strength to work and earn money, the water to drink. God can give that and he can withhold it.

It's a real wake-up call to those who are listening. And it is a correction to everyone. Well, thankfully, God's word didn't just reveal their hearts. And this is how God's word works, doesn't it?

It does correct us. It cuts us to the heart when we are going wrong. But it always gives us the way forward. It always shows us where to go for the place of blessing.

And so God doesn't just reveal their hearts. He also gives zeal to their hearts as well. And so the second thing to obey, besides evaluating oneself and one's spiritual self, is to obey, to take action that is opposite to conventional thinking around them.

And so God says in verse 8, Instead of, it's not yet time to rebuild the house of the Lord, which is the conventional thinking, He says in verse 8, Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house.

[15 : 19] And for what reason? What's your motivation? That I may take pleasure in it, and that I may appear in my glory. See, that's a critical line there.

That is the dimension that was missing to the people listening to Haggai. That they needed to strive to please God and bring glory to Him. They needed to strive for God to take pleasure in what they were doing and to bring glory to God.

And that's the great compass of our Christian lives as well. That in everything we do, in our work, in our social life, in our free time, in our families, that we would strive to please Jesus Christ, the Lord, and bring glory to Him as well.

You see, that striving is spiritual health. That is what spiritual health is all about. It's the sign that we are God's own people, brought, bought by Jesus' death on the cross, and raised to a new life.

I used to live up on the Sunshine Coast, and one of the things I used to enjoy doing in the fall was going to one of the many salmon streams that were all around us. And to watch these salmons make their incredible journey up these streams.

[16 : 35] And when you look at these hundreds and thousands of salmon, you saw a real range in the health of these fish. Some of them were doing quite well. They were very energetic.

They're splashing away, making their way upstream. And you could tell very easily which ones were the healthy ones. It was the ones that were purposely going upstream. And being the great observer of marine life, I always knew which ones were dying, because they were floating down the stream.

They were not fighting against the current. They were just being taken down. And you know that they weren't going to live much longer. Their health was very, very bad.

And that's a picture of the Christian life as well. Because Christians that are spiritually alive are swimming with purpose against the stream of our society around us, the way of thinking, the conventional wisdom that is around us.

And we're splashing and kicking away, but we are making our way to that place that's been implanted in our minds, the place that God has given us to go, the place of blessing. But those that are drifting in this world and going along with what is going on around us and the conventional thinking are in grave spiritual danger.

[17 : 55] They are not healthy spiritual. And they are in need of God's word to wake them up and make them strive to bring glory and pleasure to Jesus Christ.

And wonderfully in Haggai, this is exactly what happens. A people that are drifting spiritually suddenly are wakened up and they are brought to life.

And so you see in verse 12 that Zerubbabel and Joshua, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai, the prophet.

What an extraordinary change. You're seeing them lose their apathy and come to life. And the people, they say, at the end of verse 12, feared before the Lord.

It's a critical phrase. It means that God took center stage in their life. God became their great priority once again. And that's why the people are no longer called this people.

[18 : 58] They are called the remnant, if you notice there in verse 12, which means they are the faithful ones who, against all odds, are continuing their living relationship with God.

And that's why you hear these incredible words that all of us in our hearts as Christians want to hear again and again and again. In verse 13, Haggai speaks the word of the Lord and he says, I am with you, says the Lord.

I am with you. You see what's happening here is they are understanding in a very powerful way the truth of all those covenants of the Old Testament, that God would be with them as their living God, the one who is their God, and they are his people.

And the result of that understanding is that God stirs up the spirits in verse 14 of Zerubbabel and of Joshua and the spirit of all the remnant of the people.

And what do they do? They come and they work on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God. In other words, they obey the voice of God. There is spiritual life in them. They are striving after the glory and the pleasure of God.

[20 : 14] See, Haggai is a picture of spiritual life and real relationship with God. What you are seeing in that chapter is a change from a people who cannot take risks for God because of their fears and because of their desires for a comfortable life.

And they are transformed into a people who hear and obey God's voice and take real action for God's pleasure and glory.

An extraordinary picture. And I want to close by saying that we as Christians in Vancouver here at St. John's have a great need for the kind of zeal that we see at the end of this chapter.

Human nature has not changed in 2,500 years, I'm sorry to say, since Haggai spoke on that August day. We very easily drift because of our own fears and because of our own desire for a comfortable life.

And we regularly need to be stirred up from our apathy and our indifference to the work of the gospel. That's why God's voice is such a gift for us. And as we see in Haggai, God stirs our spirits through his word.

[21 : 29] He brings us life and zeal for the pleasure of God and the glory of God. And it doesn't happen, as James said, in that great, it just happened to be read today, but it doesn't happen simply in hearing God's word, but in obeying God's word.

That's the key in this chapter. The Christian life is not about how much you know about God's word. It's about how faithfully you obey it. And so the question we're asked this morning are, are you constantly looking for ways to please Jesus and bring him glory?

Because in the end, there is a deep blessing for you and I in the hearing and obeying of God's voice, in striving after his glory and his pleasure.

Because when we actively respond to God with our prayers and our time and our gifts and our money, we actually experience this incredible gift of knowing that God is with us.

God speaks to us very clearly and powerfully when we are in the act of obeying him. That's why James said, the one that, he says, a doer that acts, this one shall be blessed in the doing.

[22 : 43] And I think the blessing is really knowing your relationship with God in a very real and powerful way. And so I want to end by having you look over the page just to the left in Zephaniah.

You don't have to turn the page. It's just on the face there. Chapter 3, verse 16. And this is a picture of the blessing we have when we strive after the things of God.

It says this, The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You shall fear evil no more. And on that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Do not fear, O Zion.

Let not your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will renew you in his love.

And he will exalt over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. This is the place of blessing. This is what it means to receive the goodness of God.

[23 : 47] And it's done as we know God is in our midst as we strive after him and his work. And that's what Jesus told us, didn't he? When you seek after me and my kingdom, all of these things will be added to you.

Amen.