

New Year's Day Service

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Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 0 0] Let's turn again just for a little to the chapter we read in the prophecy of Haggai. We read at verse 19, This is seed yet in the barn. Indeed the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded to nothing.

But from this day on I will bless you. One of the wonderful things about being a Christian is that you are on a side that is always ultimately going to conquer.

We are told in fact that we are more than conquerors through the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's a wonderful thing to know. Because even although the cause of Christ may sometimes appear very low, and that can be true at a national level.

And sometimes we may feel it even so in our own hearts at a personal level, where we feel that the flicker has become very dim. Sometimes we feel like that. Other times we don't.

But when we look around, sometimes we think that the cause is so low. And it's very easy to become despondent. But what we've always got to remember is that the Lord will never ever allow his cause to be obliterated.

[1 : 2 7] As we say, there's times it went low. It did so in the days of Noah. Because it would appear that Noah and his family, they found grace in the eyes of the Lord. And the Lord set about saving his church, saving his church through the family of Noah.

So there are times when the cause has gone very, very low. But it will never be extinguished. Because it's his work. And we've always got to remember that, we've said it so often before, that with regard to this world, there is only, although the Lord is Lord of all, at one level there is only one thing that he is really going to take out of this world, and that is his people.

Because we're told they are his portion. Out of all the world, his people are his portion. And that's such an encouraging thought, that out of everything else in this world, of all the glory and splendor and majesty and things that many people look at and they say, whoa, isn't that wonderful?

It's all going to pass with the using. But the Lord is building, building, building his church, made up of all the individuals of you and me and everybody who loves the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is his portion. This is who he delights in. And so he's never, ever going to allow his people, his cause, to be obliterated.

[2 : 5 3] Sometimes we have difficulty in understanding these things, but that is how it is. And so we find here that the land, the Jews had, it was, this is after the exile.

Some of them have come back as you read about all these things. And the Lord had sent three prophets. Haggai, this prophet, is the first of a trio of prophets.

There's Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi. And they were sent with a great message of encouraging the people towards rebuilding and really the great principle of putting the Lord first before anything else.

That's one of the great themes in this particular prophecy. Because it becomes very clear to us as we read it that the Jews had got it back to front.

They had begun, yes, they had begun, but they had faced so much opposition that they kind of gave up on it. And they made the great mistake, and it's a mistake we can all make and a mistake we often make, of putting providence above the word.

[4 : 06] You see, the word given to them was to rebuild. God had made it very clear to them that they were to rebuild, and they were to lift up from the wreckage and the ruins.

But they faced a lot of opposition. And they took this opposition as a sign that, in the end, that they were just to give up. And what they did was they actually gave up, and they started then sorting themselves out and building their own homes and sorting everything out.

And it's very easy for us sometimes to put providence above the word. Because sometimes when we see the way things are going, we say to ourselves, oh, well, this seems not to be working.

Now, don't get me wrong, we are not to dismiss providence. And it is, at the end of the day, God's providence. But we are never to take providence particularly over the word if it is going contrary to the word.

And there are times in God's providence, there are many times in the Bible when you have examples of his providence appearing. It doesn't actually, but it appears to be going contrary to the word.

[5 : 20] And, for instance, the likes of Joseph's life. That was part of his great trial until the time that his word came, the word of the Lord tried him.

Joseph was languishing for years in the prison. And everything seemed to be going so against what he had believed. David was on the run for years from Saul. Everything was going so against what God had said to him.

So we've always got to remember there are times when God's providence and God's word appear to be going in opposite directions. But if they are appearing to be going in opposite directions, it's only for a while because they will come together again.

And God will use these periods in testing us, in strengthening us, in building us up, because that's the most important thing for our lives. Got to remember that it's our faith. We so often have other needs, and we think the Lord will say and read there, oh, the Lord will supply all your needs.

And you think, oh, that's great. But what we may consider our needs and what the Lord considers as our needs may be poles apart. And sometimes we get caught up with the wrong things.

[6 : 33] The Lord is never caught up with the wrong things. And his great purpose is to build us, to build you and to build me up, to become pillars, to become men and women and boys and girls who begin to resemble him and who will live for him in this world.

That's what he's about. And so we've always got to remember that, although things might not be going the way we think or the way we expect, God has a purpose and a plan.

So the rule always has to be, first and foremost within our lives, is God's word. We're told that, we learned that. The only rule to direct us, how we may glorify and enjoy him, is the word.

It is the primary thing that we are to build our lives upon. So the Jews were guilty here of replacing providence over against the word.

And, of course, things weren't working for them. Because if we had read through chapter 1, we would see that very clearly.

[7 : 41] Because chapter 1, verse 2, we find there, thus says the Lord of hosts, these people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

Well, the time had come, and they had the word to rebuild it. But as we say, this is where they were taking the providence over against the word. And, you know, so often we can be guilty of saying the very same thing, that the time has not yet come.

These people say the time has not yet come. And I believe that the worst example of that is with regard to salvation. Because I believe that week in, week out, in this church, and in churches all throughout our town and throughout our land, people are saying the same thing.

Oh, the time has not yet come with regard to salvation. Every time the gospel is preached, the offer of salvation goes out in order that people will submit unto the Lordship of Christ.

And many people are affected and touched, but they say, oh, the time has not yet come. It's not quite the time. It's not the right time. There's another time.

[8 : 53] It's not convenient for me. It'll spoil my plans. I have every intention of dealing with that. But not just now. Well, that's one of the worst mistakes that a person can make.

And I hope today, if there's anybody in here who has not yet closed in with Christ, if anybody has not yet submitted under the Lordship of Christ, seek today that you will.

You couldn't begin a year in a better way than submitting under the Lordship of Christ, asking the Lord Jesus Christ to become your Lord.

It will be the radical change. It will be that which guarantees your future in the right way. Anyway, these people here, as we see, they were seen to their own houses, but not the Lord's house.

And that's why in verse 5 of chapter 1, the Lord is saying to them, now therefore, says the Lord of hosts, consider your ways and see what happens. Because they have relegated the Lord right out of the picture and have just become totally obsessed with themselves.

[10 : 01] The Lord is saying, have you not noticed what's happening? Nothing is working for you. That's what it's saying in verse 5. Now therefore, says the Lord, consider your ways.

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 does so to put them into a bag with holes. In other words, they couldn't save anything. So that everything that they were trying to do, it was going against them.

And it's quite a bleak picture. And so it's very important for us to grasp this. God is not mocked. And this is, I would say, one of the great books in the Bible that is hammering home the New Testament principle of seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the other things will be added to you.

Put the Lord first and he will see to the other things. They had put it the other way around and they were seeing to the other things first and the Lord says to them, because you're my people, this will not work.

[11 : 24] And it is not working. And what a lesson it is for ourselves individually and nationally. But of course, Haggai's great job is to encourage the people.

He wasn't there just to hammer them. He was there to rebuke them and to refocus them and to re-challenge them and say, hey, you've got to turn around. You've got to get back on track, get your focus fixed upon the Lord and rebuild.

That is really the message. And this great way of encouraging them to do that is reminding them, as we have there in chapter 2, in verses 4 and 5, yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, be strong, O Joshua, be strong, all you people of the land.

Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord. My spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. What an encouragement.

Because I'm sure some of these people, and particularly the older people, they remembered the glory of the former. They could remember that magnificent temple.

[12 : 28] And it was now in utter ruins. Just had been smashed to bits and all the valuables taken away, all the gold and stuff stripped had been taken to Babylon. There was probably reeds and rushes and brambles and everything growing.

You know the way you see, sometimes you see houses maybe at 200 years old or 150 years old when you're out in the moor. And there's just a rubble of stones and it's full of brambles and thistles and just, it's hard to imagine people actually lived there.

Well, here's the glory of this temple. And some of the older people could remember it. And it broke their heart thinking about it. But the Lord is saying, no, get to work. And the great encouragement that he gives them is, look, I'm with you.

I, it's not just I'm with you. It's not just I'm nearby. It's not just that I come occasionally. I am in your midst. Right there, in you, in with you.

You see, they were his people. He's at the very center of it. And it's the same for us and sometimes we lose sight of that. We maybe today forget that the Lord is in our midst.

[13 : 43] He is right here with us. And that is the great encouragement to work. To work, whether it is evangelistically, whether it is in the by way of witness, or whether it is even within our own personal growth.

The Lord is here with us all the time. And so, as we say, these people, some of them were looking back and they were forgetting that the Lord was able to restore, as it were, the years that the locusts have eaten.

And I think today, as we begin another year, it's very important for us to focus upon this. Now, I'm not minimizing or in any way trying to belittle the sorrows and the pains that people have.

These are real. And many of you carry and have gone through crushing blows in life. But I think it's very important, even on a day like this, to try and focus upon the Lord.

And to try and see Him as enthroned in glory and in majesty. And the one who is leading His people triumphantly through this world.

[14 : 53] And if you are one of His people, you are being led triumphantly through this world, whether you feel it or not just now. But you are. And we've got to remember this because it's so easy.

The devil wants us to be down. He wants us to lose the spark, to feel helpless, to feel useless, to say, what's the point? That's what some of these Jews were saying. Oh, what's the point?

They were remembering the great old days. And do you know, sometimes we look at the good old days through rose-tinted glasses. And so, yes, let us remember.

And it's wonderful to remember the past. And we learn from the past and we build in the past. But we don't live in the past. We're living in the present, moving out into the future with the Lord who doesn't change.

And that's so important for us to remember where we are, who we are, and who we are with. that we're with the King of Glory. And all the resources are there for us.

[15 : 54] All the promises are there for us. It was Spurgeon who used to say the promises of God that they're like checks. And that when you go to the bank with your check, you will receive the amount that is promised there for you.

That is guaranteed. And he says the promises of God are like checks. That we are to go to the Lord. And we're to say to him, Lord, do as you have said.

And the Lord loves us to come with his word, praying with his word. And if we pray according, that's what we're told. If we pray according to his will, he will hear us.

And we will receive what we have asked for. And we know we're praying according to his will when we bring his word to us, to him.

And so we've got to remember that all the resources are there for us. Now there's so many things that we could talk about.

[16 : 55] But when we move on to verse 17, the Lord again is saying to them, look, he says, I have struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew, with hail, yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord.

See, the Lord was speaking to them. Firstly, this is the way the Lord works. He speaks to us in his word. He speaks to us through the still small voice. His spirit which remains within us convinces us and convicts us in his word.

But if we won't listen to him, then the Lord has no option but to begin to deal with us in providence. And that's what he was doing to the Jews.

And you know, I think there are so many lessons say it for us today. You know, we live in a world that is so uncertain. So many people are afraid of the future.

And you look at it at the financial markets and the whole global economy and people are, there's this uncertainty. People are looking at the growth within their land.

[18 : 01] Is it actually growing? Where are we? Yeah, we might be one of the richest countries in the world but it's so fragile. It's really fragile. Everybody is so aware of it.

The great global threat of terrorism. And then there's all the floods and the storms and earthquakes all over the world. And people are saying, what kind of world is it?

And through it all, God is speaking and he says, fix your eyes upon me. And I think nationally, that is one of the things, we're not here, we're not listening to the Lord.

And so many of our leaders and people are not pointing the finger because like Daniel, we've got to begin with ourselves. And we're not saying because of the terrible floods in part of England that these were worse sinners than any others.

We don't say that just in the same way that Jesus said about those that the Tower of Siloam fell in were worse sinners than any. They weren't. But the Lord is showing us our own vulnerability that in the face of all that's happening in the world, whether it is at an economic level or whether it is man's hatred of his fellow man or whether it is all the natural storms, disasters, he's really saying to us, hey, you're not in control.

[19 : 26] It doesn't matter what you build. It doesn't matter what you spend. It doesn't matter what you do. If you have forgotten me, I'm going to show you more and more how helpless you are.

And that's why it's so important that we turn to him and we have to begin with ourselves. That's, we've often highlighted Daniel's prayer before. Daniel, that exceptional believer.

And you read Daniel chapter 9, his great confession before the Lord. Does he say, oh, you people have sinned. No, he said, we have sinned.

Them and me. He included himself. And that is one of the most fundamental things that we've got to see. We have to begin with ourselves.

And so the Lord is saying to them, look, this is what's happened. But it's all going to change. And this is exactly what did happen.

[20 : 27] When they picked up the work again, when they began to rebuild, the Lord says, I want you to take note. I want you to consider.

And he actually mentions particular dates. It's quite amazing. He says, you know, it's full of these sort of things on a particular day.

He says here, the 24th day of the ninth month, the day the foundation of the temple was laid, consider. Here's a date for your calendar.

Here's a date for your diary. Here's the very day when I changed things. It's not amazing. The Lord is saying to us, you take note of this.

Maybe for some of you, the day you came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the day that you may have it marked in your diary. A lot of people cannot.

[21 : 26] Some people can. They can mark. They can give a specific time, a specific day, where they're able to say, you know, I know of people who walked into church with no thought of the Lord.

And they came out full of the Lord. It was like what we would term a Saul of Tarshish kind of experience. But probably the majority of people cannot follow that. The Lord works in different ways, always in the same way at one level.

There aren't other ways. There's no various ways of being regenerated, of being born again. But our experience, our own personal experiences of coming to an awareness of what has happened, that, of course, is varied.

And that's why we have different people give their different testimonies. But here is this particular day when everything changed. And the Lord is saying to us, you turn to me.

He says it personally, and he says it nationally. And today's a good day. You know, very often people on the New Year's, they make resolutions. Well, this is a good day to stop and to think spiritually, where am I?

[22 : 40] Where am I in all this? Because I believe, above anything else today, what the church needs are people who will spend time alone with the Lord.

And the reason I'm saying that is the Lord Jesus tells us in Matthew there about the importance of drawing aside and entering into our own wee place with the Lord alone.

And praying to our Father in secret. And that our Father who hears and sees in secret will reward openly. Now, we live in a day where there's very little time.

And I'm sure that all of you, if you were to make one great confession today, it would be how little time you have for personal prayer, of being alone with the Lord.

We're not talking about a rushed devotion in the morning or a wee bit at night or something like that, but taking time out, taking serious time. And you will see that the great men of the Bible who did the most for the Lord, who influenced the nation for good, were the people who had long times alone with God.

[24 : 01] The Moseses, the Davids, the Daniels, the Pauls, all of them. Their impact on their respective societies was huge.

And they were all men who were given to being alone for long periods with the Lord. Martin Luther, who was termed the monk who shook the world, he changed the world.

He was a man who gave two, three hours every day in devotion and prayer because he was saying, I cannot operate, I cannot work, I cannot achieve unless I do that.

And these were people, their impact on society was great because the Lord who heard in secret rewarded openly. is maybe that part of the reason why the power of the church is not what it used to be.

Because we've always got to remember that God begins with the church, begins with us. And I think today is a day where we've got to examine where am I in relation to this?

[25 : 11] How much time do I give to the Lord alone? How much time do I wrestle alone with the Lord and pray it? I believe that that is what we need.

And the Lord who says, my spirit remains among you. He's in the process of building you up. Because maybe as you've entered into 2016, you're looking back and you're saying, you know this, I thought at the beginning of 2015 this was going to be the year when I was going to become a really good Christian.

I was going to become holy. I was going to become the man or the woman that I believed long ago. When I was converted, I had such great aspirations. I thought I would be a wonderful Christian.

A shining example to everybody. The years have gone on and each year I thought, maybe this year. And I still feel, I feel a failure.

I feel the same. And sometimes God's people can become despondent but the Lord says, fear not. My spirit is in your midst. I'm with you. I haven't abandoned you.

[26 : 21] I haven't forgotten you. I haven't let you go. I'm building you up. And it doesn't matter supposing you go as low as Peter went. You remember how tenderly and gently the Lord built him up and restored him.

That's what the Lord is doing. And he continues to do. When Zion's bondage, God turned back as men had dreamed were we. Well, may we know the Lord's building, the Lord's encouraging us.

May we go forward in the strength of God the Lord and may he prosper us spiritually and that we may live in absolute dependence upon him. Let us pray.

Lord, our God, we give thanks for your encouragement in the word but also your challenge to us in the word. It is so easy for us to become preoccupied with all the things going on in this world that sometimes we lose the focus and we need to see exactly where we are.

We need to see personally, not to look at others but to look at ourselves. We pray, Lord, that you will bless us and that you will be gracious and merciful to us.

[27 : 37] May we know your prosperity and your peace this year and may you bless us in many, many different ways. We ask, Lord, as we prepare to leave from here that we will go with your blessing.

We pray to bless a cup of tea and coffee in the hall after. We pray to be with us night and day and take away from us all our every sin. In Jesus' name we ask it.

Amen. We're going to conclude singing from Sing Psalms in Psalm 126. Psalm 126 from Sing Psalms.

And we'll sing the whole psalm. Psalm 126 from Sing Psalms. Psalm 126, page 171, when Zion's fortunes God restored, it was a dream come true.

Our mouths were then with laughter filled, our tongues with songs anew. The nation said, the Lord has done great things for Israel. The Lord did mighty things for us and joy our hearts knew well.

[28 : 51] Psalm 126, a whole psalm, when Zion's fortunes God restored. When Zion's fortunes God restored in all our dreams come true, our mother then will offer will, our tongues with songs anew.

The nation said, the Lord has done great things for Israel.

The Lord did mighty things for us and joy our hearts knew well.

Reast for the forges gracious Lord, like streams and deserts are.

A joyful heart will reward the weeping so our time.

[30 : 09] The man who may sing to so know the who will love and will love and will his harvest share.

Now may the grace, mercy, and peace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest and abide upon each one of you now and forevermore. Amen. .